University of Alberta

Educators' Perceptions of a Professional Learning Community Model

by

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Abstract

With the increased interest in implementing professional learning community models in schools throughout the developed nations, the traditional notion of teacher as "autonomous professional" is being challenged. This case study of a K-9 Albertan school addresses a relative absence of research that reports on the perspectives of school-based educators involved in the implementation of professional learning community models. The purpose of the research was to investigate how educators' professional and personal identity is affected by participation in a school-wide professional learning community model. The major recommendation of this study was that in implementing a professional learning community model, attention must be given to the complexity of school cultures and the structural and social conditions necessary to create such a community among teachers. The study also raised questions about the implications of using a communitarian-based model as a tool for increasing accountability and sustaining a culture of continuous improvement in schools.

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Table of Contents

Chapter	Page
Chapter 1- **Introduction to the Study**	1
The Researcher	2
Research Questions	5
Purpose of the Study	5
Definition of Professional Learning Community	6
Delimitations	8
Limitations	8
Significance of the Study	8
Organization of the Thesis	11
Chapter 2- **Literature Review**	12
Contemporary School Reform Initiatives	12
Contemporary Context of Educational Reform	12
Educational Reform and Change	13
An Understanding of Community	15
Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft	15
Purpose and Definition of Professional Learning Communities	17
Structure of Professional Learning Communities	19
Building a Learning Community	20
Community and Sameness	21
Metaphors and Community	22
Teacher Identity within a Communitarian Model	23
A Tradition of Individualism	24
Professional and Personal Identity	25
Teacher Identity and Motivation	27
Summary	28
Chapter 3- **Methodology**	30
Research Design	30
Site and Entry	31
Site Description	31
Sampling and Participants	33
Data Collection	35
Data Analysis	37
Trustworthiness	39
Ethical Considerations	39
Summary	40
Chapter 4- Understanding and Expectations of a Professional Learning Community Model	41
Definition of Professional Learning Community	41
Naming Good Teaching Practice	42

Labels with a Purpose 44
Knowledge-Building 45
Collaboration 46
Initiation of a Professional Learning Community Model 47
Perceived Need and Benefit 47
Trust and Time 49
Implementation of a Professional Learning Community Model 50
Trust and Time Required 51
Principal Leadership 52
Time and Resources 53
Embeddedness of Change 54
Recognition of Individuality 55
Summary 57

Chapter 5- **Benefits and Challenges to Professional and Personal Identity** 59
Benefits to Professional and Personal Identity 59
Shared Systems of Meaning 59
Self-confidence 61
Risk-taking 63
Synergy 64
Learning 65
Professionalism 66
Summary 68
Challenges to Professional and Personal Identity 69
Vulnerability 70
Loss of Teacher Autonomy 74
Loss of Power 77
Summary 80

Chapter 6- Manner in which Educators Evaluate Models of Professional Learning Community 81
Philosophy and Purpose 82
Benefits to Students and Teachers 82
Helping Teachers in their Practice 82
School's Purpose 84
Model's Impetus 86
Personality 87
Leadership and Implementation 88
Top-Down and Bottom-Up 88
Relationships 88
Contextual Factors 89
Practicality 90
Teacher Workload 91
Local Context 91
Summary 92

Chapter 7- **Conclusions and the Ongoing Journey** 94
Overview 94
Purpose 94
Methodology 95
Conclusions 95
"That Which Is" 96
"That Which Could Be" 97
"That Which Complicates" 98
Implications for Practice 100
Recommendations for Further Research 101
The Journey Continues 102
Current Context 103
Teacher Overload 103
Money and Resources 105
Loss of Control 105
Teacher Response 108
Surrender 108
Resistance 109
Hope 110
Conclusion 111

References 115

Appendixes
A: Letter of Information 122
B: Letter of Consent 124
C: First Focus Group Interview Schedule 125
D: First Individual Interview Schedule 126
E: Second Individual Interview Schedule 128
F: Second Focus Group Interview Schedule 130
G: Participant Questions about Professional Learning Community Models 135

Tables
1 Reflective Questions Used to Focus My Research 3
2 Participant Profile 34

Chapter One

Introduction to the Study

Ron Adams is a 45-year-old junior high social studies and physical education teacher in an urban, middle-class school. In his 20-year career, he has worked in three different schools, and always been involved in extra-curricular activities such as coaching (he loves sports!) and debate club. Ron feels pretty confident in his ability as a teacher; his students always do well on standardized provincial tests and he prides himself on the relationships he builds with his students. His lessons are creative and interesting, and evaluations that he has students complete each year are always filled with positive comments.

Ron had always considered himself a positive team member – that is, until the new principal moved in. It quickly became apparent that this principal had an agenda, and Ron quickly nicknamed it PLC (Professional Learning Community) Warfare. Collaboration, collaboration, collaboration...that was all he heard. The principal structured everyone into cross-discipline learning teams, and they had to meet every Monday at 7:45a.m.! Everyone was required to visit another classroom for a half-hour each month AND report back what he or she had learned, along with some critical questions about their own practices. Now, Ron didn't want to leave his own classroom – he had good things going and felt these visits to be a superficial and useless exercise, not to mention the supply plan he had to write when absent from his class. Staff meetings were changed from chatty and informational to work sessions related to the school's instructional focus. Sports uniforms were no longer considered a worthy agenda item. And then there was professional development...! No longer could he go to his annual Physical Education and Social Studies conferences each year, because now they no longer fit into the targeted school professional development plan.

Ron felt undermined as an individual – his opinion on issues no longer seemed important. And all his past work and credentials as a professional seemed irrelevant. He definitely felt like an outsider in this new school "community."

****

The Researcher

In an initial graduate course, I was introduced to the theory and underpinnings of professional learning community models, largely through the work of Mitchell and Sackney (2000). At the time, I was an administrator implementing a district-mandated professional learning community model in a K-9 school. Until taking this course, I was quite unaware of the quantity of literature about professional learning communities. Nor was I cognizant of the fact that there was more than one model. I realized that the popular DuFour and Eaker model (1998) my district had unofficially adopted was only one way of looking at professional learning communities. Mitchell and Sackney's (2000) model, which promoted the development of personal, interpersonal, and organizational capacities simultaneously, appealed to me in that it dealt with knowledge-building and learning at all levels. The model I had been implementing focused more on the individual's growth in terms of organizational goals, rather than highlighting the development of individuals and social relationships through the de-construction and co-construction of knowledge (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000).

I began to reflect on the challenges of developing personal capacity at the same time as organizational capacity, especially in light of the norms of isolation and autonomy that have characterized the teaching profession (Lortie, 1975). As I began to read literature such as Little and McLaughlin's *Teachers' Work: Individuals, Colleagues, and Contexts* (1993), my interest turned to the voices of teachers who were experiencing the cultural changes brought about by mandated professional learning community models. In that initial graduate course where I learned about diverse models of professional learning communities, I introduced my final term paper with the above fictional vignette about a teacher who was resisting the implementation of a professional learning community model in his school.

Who is Ron Adams? Ron Adams is a composite of a number of colleagues and acquaintances who have shared their stories with me, stories that reflect the challenges of a model which impacts not only teaching practice, but patterns of collegial relationships that extend to the foundation of school culture.

My advisor encouraged me to take the time to reflect on my reasons for writing the vignette. As I "paused" to do this, I realized that I was trying to understand the issue

from the perspective of both teacher and administrator. I felt that if I wanted to effectively initiate and implement a professional learning community model as an administrator, I first needed to clearly understand the concept and its implications from a teacher perspective, particularly from the viewpoint of teachers who were not openly embracing this new model.

As questions help me think through conceptual and practical issues, I phrased my thoughts in the form of teacher questions about professional learning communities, administrator questions about such models, and questions about new models in general (Table 1).

Table 1

Reflective Questions Used to Focus My Research

Teacher Questions
• *What is the purpose of teachers/schools?*
• *Is this all about the principal looking good? What is the administrator's motivation for doing all this – is it simply mandated by the district?*
• *What is the real reasoning and motivation behind collaboration?*
• *Can you show me how professional learning communities improve student learning?*
• *In this model, what defines a "good" teacher? Has the definition changed? Do I no longer fit with this new culture?*
• *What about the importance of teacher/student relationships as a priority? (as these teachers see a shift to collegial/collaborative relationships, and not always peers with whom they feel comfortable)*
• *Why are traditions that I valued now disappearing?*

Administrator Questions

- *Is it solely about how professional learning communities are implemented? Does the administrator make all the difference?*
- *Can an attitude be changed by the doing, or does the right attitude have to be there first?*
- *How is conflict viewed and handled in professional learning communities?*
- *Is resistance to this model related to gender and/or age?*
- *How do I deal with teachers who resist, or worse, sabotage the implementation of professional learning communities? Do I need to give them freedom, or do they need to "tow the party line?"*
- *Are resistant teachers simply too comfortable and not wanting to be stretched, or do they think that they have "arrived?"*
- *What kinds of collegial interactions do teachers value? Why?*

New Model Questions

- *For what reasons are new models adopted?*
- *How are new ideas presented? Is research done first? Shown to teachers? Are teachers even interested in research?*
- *If new models' values/beliefs clash with a teacher's sense of identity, what sort of process occurs?*
- *Do different age/gender/personalities react in different ways to new models?*
- *What do teachers care about when it comes to a new model – How it fits in with their own beliefs/values, or how it relates to learning of students?*

The asking of these questions assisted me in focusing on a topic for my master's thesis, and prompted me to undertake a case study of a K-9 school where a professional learning community model was being implemented. Through my research, I hoped to understand how teachers saw participation in this model as affecting their professional and personal identity.

Based upon my own experience, I assumed that there were differences in how teachers responded to implementation of professional learning community models. I believed that the variation in response was due to such factors as manner of implementation, school culture, and teacher personality. I also believed that there were more than a few "Ron Adams'" in the teaching profession, and that rather than labeling

and dismissing these "resistors," there were more positive ways for administrators to work with, engage, and learn from these individuals when implementing a new model.

Research Questions

Three central questions, arising from my reading, thinking, and lived experience, became the focal point of the study. The questions which guided the study were as follows: (a) What are educators' understandings and expectations of a "professional learning community model", both how it is initiated and implemented?, (b) What are educators' perceptions of how their sense of identity is affected by participation in a professional learning community model?, and (c) What is the manner in which educators evaluate models of professional learning community?

Purpose of the Study

In Canada, where education is provincially governed, the notion of schools operating as professional learning communities is evidenced in the rhetoric of educational policy and school improvement. In Alberta, for example, Recommendation #13 from Alberta's Commission on Learning requires that "every school operate as a professional learning community dedicated to continuous improvement in students' achievement" (Alberta Learning, 2003, p. 65), a recommendation that was approved by the Alberta government in 2005 (http://www.education.gov.ab.ca/commission/ACOLStatus2005.asp). Many schools have already taken up this challenge of implementing professional learning community models, as is seen in the current number of government-sponsored Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) projects which have included the terminology of "professional learning communities" (http://www.education.gov.ab.ca/k_12/special/aisi/ClearingHouse/report_cycle2/). Begun in 2001, the purpose of the AISI program is improvement of students' academic performance and school effectiveness through three-year action research projects in Alberta school jurisdictions.

In addition to this government directive, the Alberta Teachers' Association has promoted the implementation of professional learning community models in schools by making available workshops and research literature that support practitioners as they attempt to build communal goals and approaches to educators' learning. But in this quest to create school environments that focus on collaboration, de-privatization of teaching

practice, and the development of shared norms and values, the traditional notion of teacher as "autonomous professional" is being challenged. My study addresses a relative absence of research that reports on the perspectives of school-based educators involved in the implementation of professional learning community models.

The purpose of my research was to investigate how educators' professional and personal identity is affected by participation in a school-wide professional learning community model. The specific objectives of the research were to collect, analyze and document: (a) educators' understandings and expectations of a "professional learning community model", both how it is initiated and implemented, (b) educators' perceptions of how their sense of identity is affected by participation in a professional learning community model, and (c) the manner in which educators evaluate models of professional learning community. The chief aim was to contribute to the educational administration literature on professional learning communities, as well as to inform administrative practice of implementing professional learning communities in the field.

Definition of Professional Learning Community

"Professional learning community" is currently a popular notion in the policy arena and professional literature. Although there is a lack of agreement on a single definition for this concept, I chose to use two sources when defining this term. As I conducted my study in Alberta where professional learning communities are mandated, the first source for a definition was a statement from Recommendation #13 of Alberta's Commission on Learning (2003):

> In professional learning communities, teachers and school administrators continuously seek and share learning and then act on what they learn. The goal is high achievement and continuous improvement for all students no matter what their individual circumstances. The objective is to enhance their effectiveness as professionals and improve their students' learning. (p. 66)

The Learning Commission (2003) identifies the following as key ingredients of professional learning communities: supportive leadership from principals, shared vision focused on student learning, teacher collaboration, capacity to analyze and use data, supportive environment – including adequate resources, shared accountability for

achievement of students, and time for teachers. Benefits for teachers identified by the Learning Commission include: reduced isolation, increased commitment to school's mission and goals, shared responsibility for student achievement, powerful learning, and increased teacher satisfaction and morale (p. 66).

A key factor of the model promoted by Alberta's Commission on Learning (2003) is the "shared work" of teacher and administrator learning for the purpose of high achievement and the continuous improvement of all students. During my graduate coursework, I became familiar with another professional learning community model which emphasized the need for teachers to work together in order to assume collective responsibility for student learning. This was the model of Kruse and Louis (1999), who characterized professional learning communities by five conditions: shared norms and values, reflective dialogue, de-privatization of practice, collective focus on student learning, and collaboration (p. 9).

The ideas presented by Kruse and Louis (1999) suggest that teachers' working conditions, including a school level professional learning community, "are a primary factor associated with responsibility for student learning" (p. 10). Further, Kruse and Louis (1999) identify professional learning communities as having the potential to lead to greater teacher satisfaction, particularly as teachers are given more ownership and responsibility in the area of student learning. While both models address the structural conditions important to building and sustaining a professional learning community, Kruse and Louis (1999) also identify the social supports crucial to such a model. As my study focused on the impact of participation in a professional learning community model on teachers' professional and personal identity, Kruse and Louis' (1999) theoretical framework appeared well suited to the research questions.

My research examined educators' perceptions of a professional learning community model. As a provincially-mandated model was the focus of my study, I utilized the definition provided by Alberta's Commission on Learning (2003), focusing on continuous improvement in students' results through the joint learning of teachers and administrators. I used the work of Kruse and Louis (1999) to augment this definition as their framework more clearly defines the interplay between individual and collective

learning in a professional learning community. In addition, Kruse and Louis identify the social supports required to initiate and implement such a model.

Delimitations

The delimitations of the study were as follows:

1. The research was delimited to the study of a K-9 school. My assumption here was that the organization of a professional learning community model spanning ten grades might be different than that in an elementary school, a middle school, a junior high school, or a high school. In particular, secondary schools organized around subject-specific departments might reflect a different structure than a K-9 school.
2. The definition of "professional learning community" used as a framework for my study was delimited to the policy statement from Recommendation #13 of Alberta's Commission on Learning (2003), augmented by the work of Kruse and Louis (1999) who also address the social conditions of professional learning communities.

Limitations

The study had the following limitations:

1. Because the primary source of data was individual interviews, the data may have been limited by the extent of the participants' willingness to share and talk freely about their perceptions and experiences.

2. The transferability of the findings may be limited by the context of a K-9 school and the fact that the school district experienced a time of labour unrest during the study. During the five-month data gathering period, from September 2004 to January 2005, a strike vote was taken and approved by teachers, while the district countered by deciding to lock out the teachers. A last-minute reprieve in the form of intervention from the provincial government reversed the lock-out decision. The government appointed a mediator, and a settlement was reached and approved by both sides in February 2005. As the main point of contention was instructional time, participants' reflections about the benefits and limitations of a new model may have been influenced by the labour dispute.

Significance of the Study

In the past decade, schools have been forced to respond to the global call for increased accountability, efficiency, and effectiveness in educational institutions.

Numerous reforms have been enacted, with relatively little success in substantially improving schools or in enhancing student achievement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Fink & Stoll, 1998; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Attention is now being directed toward the transformation of school culture as an essential ingredient of school improvement (Kruse & Louis, 1995; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Sergiovanni, 1994). The rising popularity of "professional learning communities" heralds cultural change as the answer to the deficits found in the current educational system. In particular, reformers view professional learning communities as an antidote to the long-standing tradition of isolation in teacher practice.

This focus on cultural change "involves the creation of shared systems of meaning that are accepted, internalized, and acted on at every level of the organization" (Morgan, 1998, p. 136). Alberta's Commission on Learning (2003) defines the type of shared meaning enacted in professional learning communities as a focus on learning rather than teaching, where teachers and school administrators continuously seek and share learning and then act on what they learn, with a goal of high achievement and continuous improvement for all students. The Alberta government's key objective in mandating professional learning communities is for educators "to enhance their effectiveness as professionals and improve their students' learning" (p. 66). Many models lay claim to the cultural benefits found in professional learning communities, such as shared norms and values, reflective dialogue, collective focus on student learning, and collaboration, all based on a foundation of trust and respect (Kruse & Louis, 1999).

While a great deal of literature describes characteristics of professional learning communities and how they can be implemented effectively (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Kruse & Louis, 1999; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000), there is little research on educators' perceptions and how participation in professional learning community models impacts both personal and professional identity. Teaching has often been characterized as an isolating profession (Lortie, 1975), particularly in secondary schools (Hargreaves, 1994). In contexts like Alberta, where professional learning communities have been mandated for all schools, it is essential to examine the perceptions of those with firsthand experience in the implementation of such models, namely the educators. My study aimed to document how educators perceive and are

impacted by a new model of organizational structure promoting school improvement. In addition, study of how educators evaluate such models is invaluable for future school reform efforts. Since teachers have a significant impact on the success or failure of school improvement and reform (Daniel, Edge & Griffith, 2002; Fullan, 1996), it is crucial to consider their perspectives.

The Alberta context provides an interesting backdrop for examining professional learning community models. The restructuring of the last decade "was driven by the perceived need to improve the efficiency of the public sector while cutting costs, and the need to increase educational standards, improve outcomes, and ensure accountability" (Taylor, 2001, p. 3). Alberta has been a leader in the country in the introduction of educational reforms, and in the number of significant changes introduced at the same time (Taylor, 2001). Minimal public consultation prefaced these reforms, leading to a great deal of teacher unrest (Griffith & Reynolds, 2002). In the midst of this competitive framework, professional learning community models assert communitarian values in a quest for "continuous improvement." How do teachers respond to this challenge within the Alberta educational system, an apparent paradox supported by both the government and the provincial teachers' association? Do teachers perceive that professional learning communities provide a needed connection between external policies and their day-to-day work?

With the ever-increasing importance placed on implementing professional learning community models in schools, not only in Alberta, but nationally and beyond, it is important for educational researchers, policy makers and practitioners to examine this model in context of Tracy's (1998) suggestion that models may act as "walls" or "windows" (p. 83). Further, in their quest for continuous school improvement, policy makers and practitioners often take up popular models that promise a "cure all", without fully evaluating the ramifications at the individual and collective levels. My study addresses the need to critically examine school-based educators' perspectives of current models of professional learning community, and has the aim to contribute to both practical and theoretical knowledge of school reform and improvement.

Organization of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 2 presents a review of relevant literature organized around three key strands: professional learning communities in the broader context of educational change and reform, complexities around the definition and understanding of professional learning communities, and the juxtaposition of teacher identity within a communitarian model. Chapter 3 provides a description of and rationale for the method employed in the study, along with a description of the site and a profile of the participants. Chapters 4 through 6 present the findings and interpretations of the three research questions that focused the study. Chapter 7 outlines conclusions and implications resulting from my study. As well, the second part of Chapter 7 details the progression in my own thinking as a researcher and examines literature that critiques contemporary educational reform.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

My review of the literature is organized around three key strands. The first strand traces the origins of professional learning community models within the framework of educational reform and change, thus providing a context for my research. The second strand suggests the challenges inherent to implementing a professional learning community model. I examine the multi-faceted perceptions of "community," along with different interpretations regarding the definition, purpose, and structure of professional learning community models. The third strand highlights the potential for tension when a communitarian model intersects with a profession steeped in a tradition of individualism. The relationship between individual and collective identity and its connection to teacher motivation are explored, along with the role played by teachers in educational change and reform.

These were the strands of literature that influenced the development of my original research questions around educators' understanding and expectations of a professional learning community model, benefits and limitations to teachers' professional and personal identities through participation in such a model, and educators' evaluation of new models. The literature review began before fieldwork and continued through the process of data collection and analysis. Additional coursework also served as an impetus for further reading and reflection, thus allowing for an ongoing and creative interplay between the processes of literature review, data collection and analysis, and researcher introspection (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). In Chapter 7, I examine literature that critiques contemporary education reform and identify further themes based on my research.

Contemporary School Reform Initiatives

Contemporary Context of Educational Reform

Government policy has become increasingly focused on the realm of education in recent years, resulting in numerous reforms. Levin (2001) describes many of these reforms as controversial and politically contentious:

> While proponents claim they will improve standards and outcomes, and will help countries to be successful socially and economically, opponents attack reforms as increasing inequity, demoralizing teachers, and destroying a proud tradition of success in public schooling. (p. 1)

In the last two decades, the call of reformers for educational re-structuring, which has included the terminology of "professional learning community," has been both vocal and persistent. Over ten years ago, Little and McLaughlin (1993) wrote, "For the past decade, we have witnessed a virtual campaign to break the bounds of privacy in teaching. It is a campaign waged less often by teachers themselves than by those who would reform their work and workplaces" (p. 1). There has been no slow-down in the appeal for the re-structuring of schools as professional learning communities in recent years. The next section outlines the context for this "call."

Educational Reform and Change

Fink and Stoll (1998) identify four basic patterns of reform that have developed since the 1970s to assist educators in dealing with change efforts dictated by such forces as government mandate and economic pressures. These include school effectiveness, school improvement, school restructuring, and school reculturing. The following explains this framework.

School effectiveness. Fink and Stoll (1998) argue that school effectiveness research emphasized outcomes, equity, progress, and consistency, and focused on the "what" of change. "Communitarian climate" was a school factor that grew out of school effectiveness research. It was associated with higher achievement, higher motivation, and better attendance in schools (Furman, 2002, p.7). Fink and Stoll (1998) contend that this branch of research said little about processes and "how" to bring about change.

School improvement. Fink and Stoll (1998) conclude that school effectiveness research led to another branch of research known as school improvement, which has attempted to answer this "how" question by viewing the school as the centre of change and then focusing on process, on-going development, and school-selected priorities. According to Fink and Stoll (1998), school improvement literature has been criticized for failing to acknowledge that it has underlying purposes. In a similar vein, Hargreaves (2000) articulates how empowerment and collaboration rhetoric have been adopted as

tools to implement government policies. Further, Fink and Stoll (1998) see that school improvement literature utilizes a managerial approach to change, assuming a "certain rationality and predictability to the change process" (p. 307), and fails to acknowledge contextual differences between schools as a variable in the change process. Teddlie and Reynolds (2000) also suggest that school improvement must give more notice to the "voice" of the teacher, as teachers' perceptions and language have a role to play in bringing improvement to life.

School restructuring. The third pattern of reform that Fink and Stoll (1998) identify emerged from the school improvement model and viewed restructuring as the key to reform. A centralized curriculum designed to help students face a global economy, supported by standardized testing to ensure accountability, seemed the key to success. At the center of most restructuring initiatives was a move toward broader inclusion in decision making, and for teachers, this translated into empowerment (Anderson, 1999).

Anderson (1999), however, argues that while restructuring is attractive in that it attempts to improve learning through visible changes in the use of time, space, roles, and relationships, some organizational theorists see that "participatory goals and practices are often used merely to legitimate the organization and are not intended to be fully implemented" (p. 192). These theorists view the top-down nature of these changes as reducing the professionalism of teachers and transforming their role into that of technician (Fink & Stoll, 1998; Morley & Rassool, 2000). As well, there is little evidence that restructuring attempts have made substantial differences in the life of the classroom and student performance (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Fink & Stoll, 1998).

Reculturing. Recent school improvement research literature focuses on the fourth pattern of reform identified by Fink and Stoll (1998), the concept of reculturing. Fink and Stoll (1998) use Fullan's (1996) definition of reculturing as "the process of developing new values, beliefs, and norms. For systematic reform it involves building new conceptions about instruction…and new forms of professionalism for teachers" (p. 4). Fullan (2001) further describes this new type of professionalism as "reculturing the teaching profession – the process of creating and fostering purposeful learning communities" (p. 136). An increased interest in the role these "communities" can play

within the current context of accountability is significant in recent literature on educational change.

In summary, educational reform initiatives of the last few decades include school effectiveness, school improvement, and school restructuring. Each has attempted to bring about change focused on enhanced student achievement. The most recent reform effort has focused on reculturing schools and transforming them into professional communities directed at improving student learning.

An Understanding of Community

The following strand examines the tensions and complexities inherent in the term "community." How has the term been defined in the educational administration literature, and what application does this have for the school setting, and more specifically, for the lives of teachers? It is essential to understand how research and theory around the concept of "community" have contributed to creation of professional community models. Further, it is important to question whether professional learning community models depict the richness of this research by reflecting the tensions and various interpretations surrounding the concept of "community."

Since the late 1980s, the notion of "building community" and developing teacher professional community has gained momentum in the quest to reculture schools (Achinstein, 2002). With fingers pointed at teachers for the lack of improvement in students' academic performance, reformers have latched onto the vision of "community" as a way of breaking down the isolation typically associated with teaching. In educational administration, Sergiovanni (1994) was one of the early and influential proponents for viewing schools as communities. He argued that community building, with a focus on relationships, needed to become the heart of school improvement efforts.

Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft

Three themes prevail in the vast education literature related to "community" (Goldman & Tindal, 2002): (a) inclusivity, implying membership for everyone in the community and clear boundaries defining insiders and outsiders; (b) collective, communal responsibility so that student success is seen as a joint obligation; and (c) personalized relationships, which may compromise formal roles, rules, and status.

These themes, which resonate the sociological tradition and are commonly used by educational researchers and practitioners (Merz & Furman, 1997; Sergiovanni, 1994; Westheimer, 1998), reflect the work of German sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies (1887/1974). Tonnies used the terms *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* to describe the changes in social relationships incurred in moving from a traditional to modern industrial society. *Gemeinschaft* depicts a strong community based on common values or familial ties. Mutual obligation, common commitments, and a sense of belonging are valued in this type of community.

In contrast, *gesellschaft* is characterized by the contractual values of a modern bureaucratic society, with relationships being more voluntary, goal-focused, and self-oriented. The appeal to return to the type of community depicted by *gemeinschaft* is echoed in reformers' calls for the type of community-building in schools that will reflect these types of relationships (Sergiovanni, 1994; Starratt, 2003). "The metaphor of community offers much to schools currently configured as formal organizations breeding feelings of alienation, isolation, and disconnectedness, among students and teachers alike" (Achinstein, 2002, p. 5). Sergiovanni (1996) suggests that schools belong closer to the "civil" end of the civil/enterprise association continuum, and thus should more closely reflect the values of *gemeinschaft*. Although not negating the value of individualism, he identifies a need for a correction in our present course, which clearly favours the individualism of *gesellschaft* over the community of *gemeinschaft*.

The encroachment of a *gesellschaft* mentality into schools, and society as a whole, is a commonly-accepted phenomenon in educational literature. Furman (2002) notes that many would also argue that "there is an almost universal and unquestioned assumption in....educational literature that 'community' is a good thing – that increasing the sense of community in schools holds promise for school improvement" (p. 2). She comments that potential positive impacts have been claimed for students, teacher, and parents. Merz and Furman (1997) describe some of the efforts of schools to create community in an attempt to address the disconnect of life and the instability of relationships outside of school. Some of these efforts have highlighted Sergiovanni's (1994) ideas to emphasize schools as "purposeful" communities where "members have developed a community of mind that bonds them together in special ways and binds them to a shared ideology" (p. 72). Others

have focused attention specifically on teacher relationships in the building of "professional communities" for collegial support (McLaughlin, 1993).

There has been much interest in restoring the community emphasis of *gemeinschaft* to schools as an antidote to the isolation and individualism of *gesellschaft*. Despite efforts at reforms in these areas, schools have not changed much (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Newman, 1999; Woodbury & Gess-Newsome, 2002). Research studies reveal isolated pockets of innovation, but system-wide reform has been elusive. As Little and McLaughlin (1993) claim, we want better schools but have fallen short in understanding how to bring such schools to life. Review of the literature leads to the question of whether it is believable to see schools at the forefront of a movement that in many ways contradicts the organization of society.

The next section examines some of the tensions that have affected perception and implementation of professional learning communities in schools. One of these is the underlying purpose of professional learning communities. Understanding these tensions provides a helpful perspective for analyzing how educators respond to mandated reforms such as professional learning community models.

Purpose and Definition of Professional Learning Communities

Within the context of reform, the purpose of "community" has been perceived in different ways. Merz and Furman (1997) point to one aspect as emphasizing the moral qualities of belonging, identity, and security found in the notion of *gemeinschaft*, while another branch highlights a focus on relationships for task-oriented purposes. Viewing this dichotomy slightly differently, Kruse and Louis (1995) see community as a "positive outcome for schools involved in improvement *and* a facilitator for stabilizing and expanding school-based reform" (p. 207) [italics added]. Huffman and Hipp (2003) agree with professional learning communities' dual role in stating that they "are not only a school-based reform; their establishment also creates a structure helpful for sustaining other initiatives intended to foster school improvement" (p. 4). Such claims prompt me to question how educators respond to this duality of roles, and whether the two roles are compatible.

Examining definitions of the term "professional learning community" further illustrates current perspectives of "community." Kruse and Louis (1999) see professional

communities as being characterized by five conditions: shared norms and values, reflective dialogue, de-privatization of practice, collective focus on student learning, and collaboration. Eaker and DuFour's (1998) practitioner-focused model echoes some of these same qualities in promoting professional learning community as "the best strategy for school improvement" (p. 25). They identify six characteristics of professional learning communities: shared mission, vision and values, collective inquiry, collaborative teams, action orientation and experimentation, continuous improvement, and results orientation. Hord's (1997) definition exhibits a similar stance in viewing professional learning community as the professional staff studying and working together in an effort to improve student learning. While the emphasis on each definition varies slightly, the common element is utilization of a professional learning community model to improve student learning, equating this with school improvement. Arguably, professional learning community models, as depicted in current writing, support claims from the policy arena that these models are the mode of transportation toward the destination.

Mitchell and Sackney's (2000) view contributes the sense of illumination, with the journey being one of knowledge-building for both students and teachers. They define a learning community as "a group of people who take an active, reflective, collaborative, learning-oriented, and growth-promoting approach toward the mysteries, problems, and perplexities of teaching and learning" (p. 8), contending that a learning community is not a recipe, but "a way of being and a way of living" (p. 139) .

Westheimer (1998) adds yet another dimension to the definition of professional learning community by borrowing from the work of social theorists. His conception of community includes features such as interaction and participation, interdependence, shared interest and beliefs, concern for individuality and minority views, and meaningful relationships. This perspective reflects the initial calls for community, which resonated with moral implications, as theorists like Sergiovanni (1994) called for a shift toward *gemeinschaft*. Policy-makers and reformers, however, have taken on the banner of "community" as a tool for more utilitarian purposes, thus serving the two goals of Kruse and Louis (1995) mentioned earlier. I would argue the paradox of a model with a communitarian foundation being utilized to promote the current accountability-based task outcomes of improved student achievement. Furthermore, the variance in conceptions of

community points to the importance of asking educators what kind of "community" they see as desirable, and for what reasons. Perhaps, as Furman (1997) asserts, one of the missing links is a strong research base on the impact of "a sense of community" in schools.

Structure of Professional Learning Communities

A further complication of professional learning communities, along with differing views on their purpose, is the variety of perceptions concerning their structure. A school-wide community is promoted by Kruse, Louis, and Bryk (1995) as the most desirable form of school organization. They envision education as a "continuum of experiences," which must be reflected in the structure of the school. Simply providing connections around common subject matter is not seen as effective in "breaking the mold" of the current educational system. Rosenholtz (1991), who sees community as originating from school-level goal consensus, also promotes the notion of school-wide professional learning communities.

Beck's metaphorical analysis of community (1999) counters this belief in concluding that there are multiple entry points in the creation of community, and that it may not necessarily begin with shared values. Beck (1999) sees community as a more organic entity. Similarly, Little and McLaughlin (1993) conclude that "whole-school studies have tended to overemphasize the school as a site for professional community and to define community as originating in school-level goal consensus" (p. 4). Their belief is that teachers embrace multiple views and typically hold multiple memberships in collegial groups both inside and outside of the school. Furman (2002) proposes what she describes as "a postmodern concept of community" (p. 65), envisaging smaller valuational communities which are part of something larger –"a school-wide culture that recognizes and promotes acceptance of differences, proactively teaches staff and students to cooperate within difference, incorporates the metaphor of global community, and attends to members' feelings of belonging, trust and safety" (p. 65).

Interpretations differ as to how learning communities should be structured. Some contend that system-wide change can occur only by having school-wide goal consensus (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Kruse et al., 1995; Rosenholtz, 1991). The type of model mandated by the Alberta government reflects this approach. Other theorists see that a

more flexible and organic approach to a learning community better reflects the context and challenges of today's society (Beck, 1999; Furman, 2002; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). Based on her research, Nias (1998) contends that the best experience for teachers would be small working groups that arise spontaneously – egalitarian groups where relationship, learning, and difference of opinion are valued. She found that in these collegial groups, "teachers were able to transcend the contradictory requirements that they had of one another, discovering in the process a fuller sense of personal identity as part of a whole" (p. 1269).

Building a Learning Community

The goal established by Alberta Learning (2003) is to build school-wide collaborative communities focused on the common goal of improving teaching and learning. Much of the popular professional educational literature about professional learning communities, such as DuFour and Eaker's (1998) model, relies on developing a learning community through a series of checklists and steps, thus encouraging a more prescriptive approach to community-building. In contrast, Starratt (2003) sees no one way to build a learning community and that "ultimately, each school has to invent itself as a learning community" (p. 240).

In the growing interest among researchers, policy analysts, and practitioners around the development and maintenance of teacher professional communities in schools, Westheimer (1999) describes efforts to build stronger school-based teacher communities as "driven by a variety of underconceptualized vision of professional communities" (p. 73). His ethnographic study found that terms used to describe communities were "vague not only in their sense of limitations in adequately describing the communities and what they are like, but more important, they masked enormous differences in the goals, structures, processes, and beliefs of these communities" (p. 73).

In summary, the literature suggests that the theory underlying a learning community model has important implications for how such a model is initiated and implemented. This, in turn, will impact how teachers perceive and respond to the implementation of professional learning communities.

Community and Sameness

Not only are there tensions in regard to the "structure", "purpose", and "method" of professional learning communities. Furman (2002) highlights a further tension in identifying the commonly-held assumption that "experiencing a *sense of community* depends on *sameness* among community members" (p. 53). According to this belief, if schools are to experience community, they must either gather those who are already the same, or create this "sameness" through some kind of shared purpose, mission, or values. The assumption that a community is "a group linked by common interests" (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. xii) has governed recent attempts to build professional learning communities. The first required step is often the development of a school statement that reflects mission/purpose. Furman labels this "sameness" assumption (2002) as "modernist," as:

> It reflects the acceptance of a dominant center, a "one best way" for articulating educational values and conducting educational practice to which all members of the school community should adhere. In this regard, it resonates with foundational, modernist approaches to truth and knowledge. (p. 54)

Arguably, the attempt to put professional learning community models into practitioner-friendly packages also reflects a modernist and linear approach to reform. Kruse and Louis (1995) report on a study of professional community in five urban schools. They found that in the two most mature communities, one school had very strong central leadership while the other, after initial pressure from the principal, remained less directed from the center and relied on semi-autonomous groups of teachers. This suggests that there is no one right way to create and maintain community, to which Foster (1997) alludes:

> A visit to many schools that have successfully established a sense of community will show an ordered chaos…While the orderliness so much desired in institutional settings is often missing in these schools, it is replaced by a dynamism that is self-generated by eager minds. (p. ix)

Other literature also warns of the dangers of attempting to prescribe communities. Merz and Furman (1997) indicate that efforts to establish more meaningful communities in

schools often result in more bureaucratic environments which continue to focus on hierarchy and rules.

Many professional learning community models place emphasis on shared mission and values among community members (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 1997), thus promoting a "sameness" or gathering together of those who are already like-minded. I would contend that a formulaic approach to professional learning community furthers this mindset by prescribing the characteristics, conditions, and outcomes of professional learning communities. Such an approach fails to acknowledge the diversity and complexity of professional learning communities argued by some scholars (Achinstein, 2002; Westheimer, 1999).

Achinstein (2002) contends that teacher professional community literature has denied the complexities of community building, settling instead for a naïve conception that sometimes disguises forms of community for *gesellschaft* relations. Her work on conflict and diversity among schoolteachers highlights the "careful balancing act to sustain wholeness incorporating diversity, to maintain differences of belief and practice while sustaining unity" (p. 153). Westheimer (1999) also argues against simplifying the notion of community as he highlights how the reform rhetoric around professional community "camouflages important distinctions" (p. 73). Westheimer sees community not as a universally defined outcome, but as "a way of traveling with a new view" (p. 102). Of course, there is much debate as to what that view should be.

Metaphors and Community

Morgan (1998) further indicates the complexity of this "way of traveling" (Westheimer, 1999, p. 102) by providing a variety of metaphorical lenses through which organizations can be viewed. In recent educational literature, metaphors have been utilized to read, understand, and shape organizational life (Morgan, 1998), thereby serving to bridge the theoretical and practical. Morgan (1998) contends that no single theory or metaphor can give a comprehensive point of view; thus, the importance of looking at schools and organizations through a variety of lenses. Morgan (1998) warns of the dangers associated with management fads that are often based on the positive attributes of a single metaphor while ignoring its limitations and distortions.

Professional learning community models, with their emphasis on shared values and collaborative activity, seem to exemplify Morgan's (1998) cultural metaphor of creating social realities. Morgan addresses the importance of leaders "creating appropriate systems of shared meaning that can mobilize the efforts of people in pursuit of desired aims and objectives" (p. 141). This echoes elements of professional learning communities from previously stated definitions (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Kruse & Louis, 1999). Morgan (1998), however, outlines the difficulties of creating shared systems of meaning that are accepted and acted upon at every level of the organization, referring to the "hidden depth of culture" (p. 137).

As Morgan (1998) utilizes metaphors to broaden understanding of organizations, Beck (1999) applies a similar practice to the understanding of the term "community." The complexity of the term is explored through analysis of language used by academics and practitioners to describe community.

Beck (1999) sees that the multiple meanings associated with this notion should be encouraged and explored, as they enrich understanding and provide guidance in creating a sense of community within schools. She references Morgan's (1998) fundamental premise that "organizations are many things at once" (p. 3). While much research has attempted to measure the impact of community on educational outcomes and student achievement, Beck (1999) propones that researchers instead "look at the life of communities through a variety of metaphorical lenses, seeking to understand the meaning(s) it has for people individually and collectively and the associated behaviors, structures, ideas, norms, regularities and irregularities" (p. 37).

I framed my research questions with a desire to understand how educators perceive this sense of "community" as affecting their professional and personal identity. This perception is impacted further by the tradition of teaching as an isolating and individualistic profession. The next section explores this tradition of teacher isolation and examines literature related to teacher identity within a communitarian model.

Teacher Identity within a Communitarian Model

In this final section, I examine the potential for tension when a communitarian model intersects with a profession steeped in a tradition of individualism. I review literature that explores the relationship between individual and collective identity,

examine teacher motivation and its connection to identity, and finally, explore the impact of these themes on educational reform.

A basic assumption of the professional learning community models that I reviewed is that teachers want to collaborate, and that in so doing, there will be a positive effect on teachers' perceived efficacy, staff morale and teacher commitment, and student achievement (Alberta Learning, 2003; Louis, Kruse, & Bryk, 1995). Hargreaves (1994), however, illustrates the power of individualism in the fact that teachers are also trained professionals who, in many cases, have spent years establishing successful teaching practices in isolated environments.

Lieberman (1993) identifies the tension between teachers' individual and collective autonomy as one of the central issues of school and classroom life. She questions how teachers maintain and enhance their sense of professional and personal identity while also contributing as members of a professional learning community, and whether there is a disparity between these two goals. Lieberman does not question the need for teacher isolation to be broken, but promotes the asking of difficult questions to consider "under what conditions, with what supports, and for what purposes teachers can be colleagues" (p. viii).

A Tradition of Individualism

Lortie's (1975) concept of the "egg crate" school, which has entrenched itself within the educational system, still exudes a sense of isolationism and individualism among teachers, and has proved difficult to change. Hargreaves (1994) states that the persistence of these isolationist patterns continues to be of concern to reformers, as individualism and isolation are often linked to ineffective teaching practices. He contends that when teachers resist collaborative reforms, the blame comes to lie with the teacher rather than the system, as the teacher becomes the scapegoat.

Little (1990) supports Lortie's (1975) "egg-crate" analysis in describing the teaching profession as "an assemblage of entrepreneurial individuals whose autonomy is grounded in norms of privacy and noninterference and is sustained by the very organization of teaching work" (p. 14). While Little views this structural condition as a primary reason for teachers' closed doors, she also identifies other contributing factors such as the costs of participatory work found in time and the risk of conflict.

Collegial work provides increased opportunity for both positive and negative interactions. Little (1990) sees that the "logic of confidence" (p. 14), which promotes a privatized teaching practice, is better sustained through limited and more superficial interchanges among teachers. Her work extends beyond what Hargreaves (1994) terms the traditional interpretation of individualism, which associates it with diffidence, defensiveness, and anxiety, viewing it as a psychological deficit. Instead, Little (1990) identifies a more complex set of factors that include not only structural and organizational conditions, but teachers' risk of exposure to criticism and conflict.

A review of the literature highlights the ongoing tradition of teacher individualism and isolation noted by Lortie (1975) over three decades ago. If professional learning community models hope to unseat this tradition by strengthening the collective identity of teachers within a school, it is important to further understand how teachers' identities are established and molded during their careers.

Professional and Personal Identity

There has not been a great deal of research dealing with the impact of professional learning community models on teacher identity. Some literature is helpful, though, in theorizing about the formation of teacher identity and its impact on collective identity.

Create and protect. Lieberman and Miller (1990) see teaching style – and thus, professional identity – as formed by how teachers resolve a central contradiction. Teachers must handle the universal and cognitive mission of knowledge-building among a group of students, while at the same time balancing the needs of each child as an individual, creating a very personal, if not idiosyncratic style. Lieberman and Miller (1990) argue that teachers' professional identity is formed primarily within the intensive confines of a four-walled classroom during the first few years of teaching, and then often militantly protected and defended for the rest of their teaching career. They conclude that this individualistic formation of professional identity has the potential to be in conflict with the communitarian-based approach of a professional learning community (p. 154).

A developmental approach. Nias (1998) identifies a more developmental approach to teacher identity, based on the premise that professional and personal growth cannot be separated. In her study of British primary and middle-school teachers, she found that preservation of a stable sense of personal and professional identity was

realized in different ways during various stages of teachers' careers. Nias argues that collegial relationships are sought to meet a range of needs during a teacher's career, beginning with practical and emotional assistance and then progressing through referential support, professional stimulation, and finally, the opportunity to influence others. Arguably, if this is the case, then teachers at various stages in their careers will approach a professional learning community model with different expectations. Similarly, evaluation of a professional learning community model will also reflect teachers' position on this continuum.

Psychological state and change. Huberman's (1988) view of teacher identity within the context of educational change extends beyond the career stages denoted by Nias (1998). Huberman (1988) links the psychological state of teachers with a predisposition to consider and act on improvements. He describes some teachers as being more self-actualized and having a greater sense of efficacy: this being dependent upon personality, influence of previous experience, and stage of career. Such teachers will take action and persist in the effort required for successful implementation of change. I would contend that this psychological state will also impact how teachers evaluate new models such as professional learning communities.

Huberman (1988) raises but does not answer the question as to whether this psychological state is permanent or changeable. Fullan (2001) contends that it depends upon both the individual and the conditions; the culture or climate of a school also plays a role in shaping the individual's psychological state for better or for worse.

Fullan's (2001) analysis is that both individual and collective identity play important roles in educational change. "Significant educational change consists of changes in beliefs, teaching style, and materials, which can come about only through a process of personal development in a social context" (p. 124). Thus, the literature points to the importance of addressing both individual and group needs in implementing a professional learning community model. However, it appears that the difficulty lies not only in considering personal development within the collective identity, but with Huberman's (1988) analysis that every individual is in a unique psychological state.

Popular educational literature promotes the positive aspects of professional learning communities for teacher identity, focusing particularly on self-efficacy and

morale. Yet, as Nias (1998) poses the question, "Is it possible for any collegial context to satisfy individuals' personal needs while also extending each of them professionally in appropriate ways?" (p. 1268).

From the research and literature presented, it appears the creation and sustenance of teacher identity is a complex interplay of the personal and the professional, and of the individual and the collective identity. I would contend that generalizing about how professional learning community models impact teachers may be difficult because of the complexity of factors involved. Despite this challenge, it is important to understand this relationship more fully, primarily because of the impact teachers have on educational reform. The final part of this section will examine the interconnection between teacher identity and teacher motivation in respect to educational reform.

Teacher Identity and Motivation

A study by Leithwood, Steinbach & Janzi (2002) examined educators' motivations to implement accountability policies. Their framework was a synthesis of two approaches (Pittman, 1998), the first being that educators' judgments will be based on the perceived consequences of the policy, especially in how relevant outcomes will be to educators' work and in how the government assists in the realization of the outcomes.

The second approach views motivational processes as a function of personal goals, beliefs about one's capacities, beliefs about one's context, and one's emotions. It is this second approach that has particular relevance to my study of teacher identity within a professional learning community model. The study (Leithwood et al., 2002) emphasized that despite government's inattention to educators' motivations in relation to accountability policies, these matters are likely to have a significant impact on students and their learning.

Hargreaves' work (1998) provides further insight into the role of teachers' emotions as a motivational process. His study of a group of change-oriented teachers in Canada targets how the emotional aspects of teaching influence educators' response to change. Teachers' emotional goals for and bonds with their students affected their responses to changes in curriculum planning, teaching and learning, and school structure. Both Leithwood et al.'s (2002) and Hargreaves' (1998) studies support Quicke's (2000) assertion in describing the important role of teachers in reform efforts, and how leaders

should address this. "Managerial strategies have to be hegemonic; that is to say, they have to capture the 'hearts and minds' of employees rather than ride rough shod over them" (p. 304).

These conclusions are particularly relevant to my study as I examine how teachers understand and evaluate a model of educational reform that attempts to reculture schools and to break through the perceived barrier of teacher isolationism. The literature also leads me to question whether the Alberta government, in mandating professional learning community models as a way to impact student achievement, has examined how educators' goals, beliefs, and values are being affected.

Research shows that teachers play a significant role in the success of educational reforms (Daniel, Edge & Griffith, 2002; Ryan & Joong, 2005; Woodbury & Gess-Newsome, 2003), and that change in education comes about only when teachers are helped to change themselves (Newmann, 1999). Fullan (1996) contends that in implementing systemic reform, the critical implementation issue is teachers' sense of coherence. "Only when greater clarity and coherence are achieved in the minds of the majority of teachers will we have any chance of success" (p. 2). Based on my review of the literature, I would argue that the importance of this "clarity" and "coherence" extends beyond the cognitive domain to encompass the affective domain as well.

Summary

My study addressed the question of how the professional and personal identity of teachers is affected through participation in a professional learning community model. My review of the literature illustrates how professional learning community models have arisen in an era of "reculturing," where hope has turned to a transformation of the habits, skills, and practices of educators, all within the context of "community." This review of the literature first traced the origins of the professional learning community concept, showing how this interest in "reculturing" schools developed. I then explored the complexity and tensions inherent in the term "community." I emphasized how these meanings and interpretations affect application of the term to a school setting, and in particular, to the lives of teachers. The final section of the review focused on teacher identity within a communitarian model, highlighting how a new framework impacts a tradition of teacher isolationism. This section also reviewed literature related to the

connection between identity and teacher motivation, and how these aspects serve to impact educational reform.

I designed my case study to gain an in-depth understanding of how educators perceive their individual identity being affected through a provincially-mandated model, a model that assumes development of the collective identity will build accountability and improve student achievement. My survey of the literature points to the complexities involved not only in identifying and defining the purposes of such a model, but in implementing a learning community given the multifarious nature of school cultures. I argue for the importance of acknowledging and learning from the voices of educators who are involved in the implementation of professional learning communities. The next chapter outlines the research methodology utilized to record the voices of educators who were willing to share their thoughts, feelings, and lived experiences in this regard.

Chapter Three

Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology of the research study, including the overall design and development of the study. I address research design, data collection, and data analysis. The chapter also includes a description of the participants and the research site.

Research Design

My investigation aimed to document the perceptions of educators involved with implementation of a professional learning community model; therefore, a constructivist research orientation appeared most suitable. The investigation assumed that teachers and administrators are inventing concepts, models, and schemes to make sense of their experience, and that they are continually judging and modifying these constructions in light of their new experiences (Schwandt, 2000). Rather than a more positivist or post-positivist orientation that seeks to characterize professional learning community models, the constructivist focus of this study emphasized educators' understanding and expectations of professional learning community models, and how educators' self-identity is affected through participation in such a model.

The research questions were: (a) What are educators' understandings and expectations of a "professional learning community model", both how it is initiated and implemented?, (b) What are educators' perceptions of how their sense of identity is affected by participation in a professional learning community model?, and (c) What is the manner in which educators evaluate models of professional learning community?

This study was conducted over ten months, from September 2004 to June 2005. I used a qualitative case study as outlined by Stake (2000). Constructivist assumptions which guided this research approach include a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities), a subjectivist epistemology (knower and subject create understandings), and a naturalistic methodology (in the natural world) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Individual (Fontana & Frey, 2000) and focus group interviews (Wellington, 2000) comprised the chief data sources. Wellington (2000) sees a research interview as a "conversation with a purpose" (p. 72), with its function to empower people by giving them a voice and

providing them with a platform. Thus, my desire was not to play a leading role in the interviews, but rather to facilitate the sharing of my participants. Other data sources included observations of classrooms, hallways, and staff meetings, analysis of relevant government, school district, school, and media documents, and a researcher journal.

Site and Entry

The site selected was a K-9 public school where a professional learning community model had been implemented two years previously. The assumption was that an elementary-junior high school includes a variety of school organizational groups, allowing for a study that addresses both elementary and secondary teachers' experiences. After receiving ethics approval, I sought and obtained permission to conduct the study from the school jurisdiction, a combined suburban/rural school district adjacent to a large urban jurisdiction. After jurisdictional authorities provided written consent, I contacted the school principal to explain the purpose and extent of the school/school members' participation, to seek permission and written consent to involve the school and discuss possible dates, and to request that the principal give written consent to become an interview participant. I then obtained written permission from the principal of the school.

Site Description

This section provides a description of the school, with a pseudonym used for the name of the school to provide anonymity. The description of Goldenview School includes general information, pertinent historical elements, perceived strengths and challenges of the school, and the principal's present commitment to development of a professional learning community model. The overview is based on the interception of experiences and perceptions expressed in the individual interviews and shared by participants during the two focus groups. Information contained in various school publications, and personal observations made during visits to the school also informed the description.

Goldenview School

Goldenview School was a K-9, neighbourhood school of 400 students located in a central Alberta town. Approximately 60% of the homogeneous, middle-class student

population was bussed in from the surrounding countryside. The school was part of a combined suburban/rural school jurisdiction located near a large urban centre.

The staff consisted of a principal, a vice-principal (who also taught part-time), 18 teachers (most of whom were full-time), and 12 support staff. Goldenview School provided regular academic programming along with two special needs classes. About two-thirds of the present teaching staff had been at Goldenview for at least ten of its thirteen years of existence. The current principal was in his third year of administration at Goldenview, having had two previous principalships within the district. When he arrived at the school, he was the fifth principal in nine years.

Goldenview opened its doors to students in September of 1993. The staff component was formed by combining teachers from an elementary school (K-6) that was closing down, and teachers from a junior high school (7-9) that was being reconfigured into another K-9 school. The staff in the elementary and junior high schools were given the option as to which K-9 site they preferred to move to, and for the most part, staff received their first choice. The new Goldenview staff moved into a brand-new building located in a burgeoning subdivision.

The two published goals of Goldenview School for the 2004-05 school year were: (a) to foster student learning and (b) to foster a positive school climate. Study participants noted a hard-working staff which was committed to the needs of children, and the members of which had a great deal of expertise in their areas. As a result of this environment, students leaving Goldenview were well-skilled, not only academically, but in other areas as well. Goldenview had a strong school structure in the sense of clear expectations of students, good follow-through by the administrative team and teachers, and strong communication links between school and home. It held a positive reputation in the community, and was seen to have a safe environment. Goldenview also had strong principal and teacher leadership in the area of technology.

Participants perceived the K-9 organizational structure as both a strength and a weakness. Some teachers saw the strong bonds that were created in a more family-like atmosphere, while others noted an unequal allocation of financial and personnel resources with the necessity of supporting a small junior high program.

The principal identified the high rate of administrative turnover as having a major impact on the culture of Goldenview. In the school's thirteen-year history, there had been five principals, with the longest term being three years. The current principal's main issue had been to pull the whole staff together as a team, united in vision and direction.

The main challenge felt by teachers was a lack of time influenced by a variety of factors. These factors included an increase in instructional and supervision minutes, the pressure of completing curricular objectives and preparing for provincial achievement tests, and the pressure of balancing academic with citizenship outcomes. Participants felt these time constraints had had a negative impact on staff collaboration and collegiality. Another commonly identified challenge was lack of resources, resulting in large classes in certain areas and a general shortage of funds.

Amidst these restraints of time and money, the principal was working to implement a professional learning community model at Goldenview, creating a staff team to take ownership of teacher and student learning.

During the time of my investigation at Goldenview, the school district was in a period of labour unrest. A strike vote was taken and approved by teachers, while the school district countered by deciding to lock out the teachers. A main point of contention was instructional time. A last-minute reprieve in the form of intervention from the provincial government reversed the lock-out decision. The government appointed a mediator, and a settlement was reached and approved by both sides in February 2005, near the end of my study.

Sampling and Participants

Once written permission was obtained from the principal of the school, I attended a staff meeting, providing information about the purpose and nature of the study, along with a written and verbal invitation to participate in the study (Appendix A). I distributed consent forms at this time (Appendix B), and requested those teachers interested in participating to complete and submit these forms before the first focus group (Wellington, 2000). This initial focus group enabled me to identify a purposive sample of participants for two semi-structured individual interviews. Six teachers attended this first focus group. I used "snowball" sampling (Wellington, 2000) to identify two more

participants for the study, ensuring representation of participants from different grades and subject areas, along with different levels of teaching experience.

Participant Profile

Table 2 provides information about the participants in the study, including current assignment, years of experience, years at Goldenview, and gender. The information was gathered from interview transcripts. Pseudonyms are used to mask the identity of teachers.

Table 2

Participant Profile

Participants	***Current Assignment***	***Years of Experience***	***Years at Goldenview***	***Gender***
Brent	Principal	10-15	3	Male
Lana	Vice Principal / Div I & III	10-15	11	Female
Susan	Div I	26-30	9	Female
Wendy	Div I	6-10	3	Female
Nadine	Div I-III	0-5	4	Female
Johnny	Div III	20-25	5	Male
Mike	Div III	26-30	13	Male
Rhoda	Div III	20-25	11	Female
Paul	Div III	20-25	13	Male

Note: Division I - Kindergarten to Grade 3
Division II - Grade 4 to 6
Division III - Grade 7 to 9

Data Collection

During the first focus group interview, I described the purpose and scope of the study. I also discussed ethical considerations, including voluntary involvement, the right to opt out of the study at any time, and provisions made for confidentiality and anonymity (Appendix C). After introductions, participants shared their perceptions of the strengths and challenges of the school. This was followed by an initial discussion concerning perceptions of professional learning community models, based upon my research questions. My intent was to ask questions similar to those that would be presented in the individual interviews, allowing participants to become familiar with the questions and providing time for reflection before the individual interviews. Neither of the focus group interviews was tape-recorded; notes taken during and after the focus group were transcribed and typewritten copies were returned to each participant for a member check (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

After all participants had given written consent, I contacted them by telephone to set up times for individual interviews. I quickly found that the best way to communicate with participants was through e-mail, as all teachers had laptop computers and were adept at using them. I conducted interviews over a four-month time period from October 2004 to January 2005. Most interviews took place at the school site during teacher preparatory periods, noon-hours, or before or after school. I found participants most accommodating in setting up interview schedules, and very gracious about taking time to participate in the study.

Eight teachers and one administrator participated in two semi-structured individual interviews varying from thirty minutes to sixty minutes in length. The first individual interview (Appendix D) allowed opportunity for me to become acquainted with the participants by having them share their professional background and reasons for entering the teaching profession. The remainder of the interview focused on three central questions, with the semi-structured nature allowing for probing to elicit further information and anecdotes (Wellington, 2000).

The second interview was also semi-structured to allow for the inclusion of individual differences. Perceptions from the first individual interview were checked for accuracy in the first part of the interview. I formulated the rest of the second interview

schedule (Appendix E) in light of what I had found in previous observations and interviews (Bogdan & Biklan, 2003). Through interviewing, I learned how to become a "flexible researcher" (Wellington, 2000, p. 72). I found Wellington's (2000) description of various metaphors for the interviewer an apt depiction of my interactions with participants. My roles ranged from "prober" to "listener" to "counselor" to "sharer," as different roles were required with different interviewees.

Each individual interview, with the exception of one, was tape-recorded. One participant was uncomfortable with having the first interview tape-recorded, so notes were taken and a summary was prepared. I transcribed all of the interviews myself. A type-written copy of each interview was returned to each participant for a member check before being analyzed as data (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

I conducted a second focus group, attended by four of the eight teacher participants, following the second set of individual interviews. At this final focus group meeting I shared results, checked the accuracy of my interpretations, and allowed for further comments and questions from the participants (Appendix F). I then thanked participants for their involvement in the study and reminded them about the option of withdrawing from the study at any time, as well as the measures being taken to provide for anonymity and confidentiality.

During my numerous visits to the school, I engaged in many informal conversations with study participants and other staff members in the staffroom, hallways, and classrooms, and before and after recorded interviews. I recorded elements of these conversations in my field journal and they became a valuable part of my data collection. As well, time spent on these "informal" interviews was an important part of building sound relationships, which I believe contributed to the trustworthiness of the study (Glesne, 1999).

Along with formal interviews and informal conversations, I had opportunity to attend two whole-school staff meetings and observe some classrooms. My field journal became an important part of the research process, and served as a tool not only to record observations, but also to document my own growth as a researcher. Glesne (1999) suggests that:

> Research is autobiographical in that some aspect of yourself is mirrored in the work you choose to pursue. Figuring out where your interests lie leads you to a greater understanding of your core values and beliefs. Such understanding, in turn, can provide greater direction for future undertakings. (p. 174)

Another part of my data collection included analysis of documents. I found official documents from the school district and school site useful in obtaining an "official" perspective (Bogdan & Biklan, 2003), and in triangulating data obtained through interview and observation. Internal documents and external communication were also helpful in providing information about school culture and style of principal leadership, thus allowing further insight into the values and beliefs of Goldenview staff members.

After completion of data analysis, I invited teachers from the research site to attend a session where I presented an executive summary and encouraged discussion. Six of the eight participants attended this session. I held a separate session with the principal to share and discuss the executive summary.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was undertaken during and after the data collection process. I analyzed the first individual interview transcripts to develop schedules for the second set of individual interviews. As well, I utilized responses from the first and second individual interviews to create an initial level of analysis to share and check for accuracy in the second focus group interview.

After completing the data collection at Goldenview, I set aside the data for two months. Although I did this in order to concentrate on my coursework requirements for the M.Ed. degree, the break did allow me time to remove myself from the intensity of the data collection process, permitting the period of "reflection" described by Wellington (2000) to strengthen interpretations.

When I returned to the data to begin content analysis, my first priority involved listening to all taped interviews to become reacquainted with the "voices" of the participants, thus immersing myself once again in the data (Wellington, 2000). I also reread each interview transcript, making notations and comments in the margins of the

transcripts and developing a preliminary list of possible coding categories (Bogdan & Biklan, 2003).

I was initially overwhelmed by the volume of data collected during my study, and attempted to develop a large set of coding categories that encompassed most of my data. A small element of the "panic" described by Wellington (2000) set in, and I realized the importance of going back to a few broad categories, as suggested by Wolcott (2001). The three broad topics from my interview schedule, which corresponded to my three research questions, seemed the most logical starting place: (a) understanding/expectations of a professional learning community model, (b) benefits/limitations of a professional learning community model, and (c) questions about professional learning community models.

I also decided to incorporate a fourth general category called "school description" which included statements made by participants about the school community and culture. Descriptive literature found in school and district documents, along with newspaper articles about the labour dispute, provided further information about the setting.

While reading through transcripts again, I began to see further patterns and added more codes as necessary, most of them forming sub-categories of the broader topics listed above. I assigned each code and subcode an abbreviation. I then went through all data to mark each unit with the appropriate coding category, finding that many units of data did indeed have more than one coding abbreviation (Bogdan & Biklan, 2003).

Once this had been completed, I printed three copies of each participant's transcripts. Each participant was assigned a different colour of paper. I cut and pasted chunks of data pertaining to the four major codes onto large sheets of paper, with each respondent's data grouped together for each category. Data for the sub-categories was also cut, sorted, and placed in labeled folders. In an age of technology, the manual manipulation of actual bits of data may seem archaic, but as Wolcott (2001) suggests, I found the process helpful in getting a visual sense of what I was trying to accomplish. As well, the visual image of nine brightly-coloured sections of data for each category provided an excellent organizing tool for further analysis and comparison of responses. I could easily compare responses of participants according to gender, years of teaching experience, or grade level.

For each of the three general research questions, I also prepared a computer document with a summary of each participant's responses from the individual and focus group transcripts. This was helpful in identifying recurring themes for each of the questions.

Trustworthiness

The following methods were used to enhance trustworthiness.

1. Member Checking. I asked participants to check interview and focus group transcripts for accuracy, inviting verification, corrections, and elaboration. I made several changes to the transcripts based on feedback from participants. Member checking also occurred at the analysis stage when I invited participants to respond to my initial analysis at the second focus group interview. This proved helpful in providing clarification and elaboration of responses.
2. Peer Review and Debriefing. Throughout the entire research process, I had opportunity to share and discuss my research with my advisor, who provided reflection and input on my work. My advisor, who visited the school several times and acted as a recorder for both focus group interviews, had internal knowledge of the research site. I also had other opportunities to discuss my research with university classmates and professional colleagues.
3. Methodological Triangulation. A multi-method inquiry, including collection of data from interviews, observations, conversations, and written documents and records, also enhanced the trustworthiness of the research.

Ethical Considerations

I took several steps to ensure that the University of Alberta's ethical standards were satisfied. First, I requested and received ethics approval from the university. Second, I contacted the superintendent and forwarded a letter of request including the ethics approval and nature of the study. I sought and received approval from the school jurisdiction using the official methods agreed upon between the university and the school jurisdiction. I then requested and obtained permission from the school principal.

In this study, I fully informed all participants of the expectations for their involvement – the number of interviews and the approximate time each would take, their right to withdraw from the study at any time, and their right to exercise powers of veto

over any data they had supplied. I provided this information, along with a description of the study and of how their anonymity was to be protected, in the form of a letter of consent. All participants signed and returned this letter. I then gave a copy of the letter to them for their own records. No one withdrew from the study and I found all participants extremely cooperative.

I provided participants with transcripts of focus group and individual interviews. I gave them opportunity to exercise their veto rights and a few made corrections to the transcripts.

Summary

In this chapter I presented the design and methodology of my study. I also included a description of the research site and the participants involved in the study. I described methods of data collection and analysis, along with measures taken to enhance the trustworthiness of my findings. Finally, I presented measures taken to meet ethical standards. The next three chapters will detail findings and interpretations made based on my research.

Chapter Four

Understanding and Expectations of a Professional Learning Community Model

I structured my study around three major research questions. The purpose of this chapter is to present findings related to the first research question: What are educators' understandings and expectations of a "professional learning community model," both how it is initiated and implemented? Three questions are subsumed under this question: (a) How do educators define the term "professional learning community?," (b) How are professional learning communities initiated?, and (c) What factors influence implementation of professional learning community models?

Definition of Professional Learning Community

The first section presents findings and interpretations related to the question: How do educators define the term "professional learning community?" Along with sharing their understanding of the term, participants also reflected on the origin of their knowledge about professional learning communities. To preface these findings, it is important to note the principal's understanding of a professional learning community model, as well as the variance in degree of participants' knowledge about professional learning community models.

While Brent, Goldenview's principal, spoke of his school as a professional learning community, he was also quick to add that he and the vice principal, Lana, had not explicitly used the term "professional learning community" with staff members. The principal and vice principal both explained that this was done in an effort to not alienate staff with yet more new "jargon." Brent spoke of utilizing the language of effective schools, which was linked to the district perspective:

> I think there are people that think that professional learning communities are a fad…Our school division, while they talk about professional learning communities as a phrase, works more with the ideas of effective schools and the work of effective schools and what they've done, and what makes an effective school. You know, effective school correlates. They would be things like a safe and orderly environment, a climate of high expectations for success, strong instructional leadership, clear and focused missions for

> schools, an opportunity to learn, student time on task, frequent monitoring of student's progress, and positive home-school relationships. Well, those are all things that professional learning communities work with, too; it's just a different semantics that describe the same thing. So, professional learning communities and effective schools, I guess, while I recognize certainly that Alberta Learning has embraced the terminology of professional learning communities, and certainly that's one of the things that they said, that every school will be a professional learning community, and there are schools in our division that say, "We are a professional learning community." I would argue that Goldenview is, too. We just don't use the phraseology.

An interesting dichotomy in perception occurred between participants with more extensive knowledge of professional learning communities and those with less awareness of such models. Those with a broader knowledge base of the subject saw such a model as a unified way to bring what they perceived as good teaching practices to the forefront, while those with less knowledge described the model as naming practices that effective teachers were already utilizing.

Naming Good Teaching Practice

Three of the participants had not heard of the term "professional learning community," while two participants had only heard the term in passing. When presented with the definition from Alberta's Commission on Learning (2003) and Kruse and Louis' (1999) work, they saw no difference between the definition of a professional learning community and what good teachers and schools were already doing. Wendy, a teacher newer to the profession, responded, "I would just assume that that's the purpose of being the school – is to be there for the benefit of children's learning and obviously staff always talk to each other and obviously there would be collaboration going on." In brief, these participants did not consider professional learning communities to be a new innovation in educational practice.

Mike, the participant with the most teaching experience, spoke to what he perceived as a fact – that "the wheel still goes around," commenting that teaching practice doesn't really change despite attempts to bring in new terminology. He gave the

example of mission statements, which are often an important aspect of developing shared norms and values in models of professional learning community:

> Mission statements were big when the school opened. Each school did it; the district did it. It was putting something down on paper that people already knew. One time the superintendent came into our staff meeting and asked, "Who can tell the district mission statement?" People couldn't because they didn't memorize it, but people could say it in different words. All the different mission statements are all the same words, just put in a slightly different order. People are all headed in the same direction. They may take detours, but they're always here for the good of the kids.

These sentiments were echoed by Johnny, with use of similar imagery. "To me, it's nothing new. I'm just being honest because I've done that my whole career, so I don't see it as anything new…What it is, I find, is just re-inventing the wheel."

These feelings expressed by Mike and Johnny illustrate Morgan's (1998) reflections on the "hidden depth of culture" (p. 137), and how the creation of shared systems of meaning that are accepted and acted upon must go far beyond the slogans of mission statements.

Susan, who also was not familiar with the term, took a more nostalgic approach in viewing professional learning communities as promoting the way schools used to be, with a reinstatement of professionalism:

> What I miss is to be able to share philosophical ideas about education and children and the nature of children, the psychological part of dealing with children. I just find that that has just – maybe that's where I'm coming from when I say that the professionalism has been taken away – I find that there's virtually no opportunity to do that…I see it as just going back to when we did it. We used to do that. I was in a school that did that. And it would be going back to something I think was a good thing. And, we've gone away from that.

These sentiments echo the findings of Scott, Stone, and Dinham (2000) who speak of "the erosion of professionalism" as perceived by teachers in a study of four western countries. Susan connected this "erosion" with a lack of collegiality and

authentic sharing, while some of the other veteran teachers associated it more with lack of recognition of their ability as professionals.

Most of the teachers who had little or no knowledge of professional learning community models felt that a professional learning community model named what they perceived to be good teaching practices. The attitude of Mike and Johnny that "the wheel still goes around" and that the professional learning community is simply "re-inventing the wheel" reflects the feelings of Ron Adams from the opening vignette in Chapter 1. Some veteran teachers at Goldenview who had seen "fads" come and go were more cynical of change, particularly when they already felt successful in the classroom as a professional. Yet, at this school there were other veteran teachers who, like Susan, felt there was room for improvement. Based on my observations and conversations at Goldenview, I would argue that these differences in perspective are affected by factors such as personality and self-fulfillment in one's career.

Labels with a Purpose

Several of the participants were well-acquainted with the term "professional learning community." Rhoda, a veteran teacher in junior high, was familiar with the term through her recent university experience and work as an instructor for the Alberta Teachers' Association; she had also read literature on the topic. Paul, another veteran junior high teacher, had read DuFour and Eaker's (1998) work on professional learning communities after hearing talk about what was happening in another district school around professional learning communities. Lana, the vice principal, spoke excitedly of all the exposure to professional learning communities provided by a progressive and active superintendent, together with the central office learning services department. As part of the school district Leadership Counsel, she spoke gratefully about receiving a great deal of material on the subject without corresponding amounts of pressure to implement these ideas.

These participants agreed that a professional learning community model helps to name good teaching practices, and that effective teachers may already be doing some of these things. However, they took this one step further in identifying how putting good practices at the forefront helps to bring common vocabulary, aims, and focus to schools, seeing this as the real merit of a professional learning community model. Lana shared in

the first focus group interview how professional learning community is defined by having a common goal and purpose. "People are all on the same page." Rhoda, in defining the term, also emphasized the sense of purpose and direction inherent in this type of model.

The two administrators and two teachers had familiarity with professional learning community models because of school district training, school level leadership, or self-initiated professional development. Their emphasis on such a model's ability to name and publicize good teaching practices and permeate these practices throughout the school makes sense when considering their roles within the school – two being administrators and one a divisional leader. While some educators may be more interested in developing their personal capacities at the classroom level, this group of individuals saw the potential to develop both personal and organizational capacity at the same time, in a manner similar to Mitchell and Sackney's theory on capacity-building (2000).

Knowledge-building

Those more familiar with a professional learning community model also saw it as helping teachers' knowledge grow in becoming more visible and more overt; these participants perceived a professional learning community as all members involved in ongoing learning and in the sharing of this learning. Lana put it succinctly in stating, "I think that's what a professional learning community is to me. It's that everyone is involved in the learning."

Rhoda stressed the importance of sharing this learning. "I think that it's a community where all staff is engaged in constant learning, and constant communication about that through each other."

In my experience as a school administrator and through my conversations with colleagues, I have seen many schools concentrate on establishing common goals and vocabulary when initiating a professional learning community, working on the aspect of shared goals and values in building "community". Perhaps this is a more concrete and achievable step, especially on the surface level. My lived experience coupled with my research at Goldenview prompt me to argue that the more difficult and elusive part of a professional learning community is often the "learning" aspect, which may be why fewer participants emphasized this concept. What is "learning" as a professional, and how do

leaders facilitate, model, and measure such learning? And must teachers' knowledge-building be done strictly within the context of the organization's knowledge-building?

Mitchell and Sackney (2000) argue that a learning community "promotes and values individual and collective learning for all members of the community" (p. 133) and that this learning is not at the service of school development. My research and lived experience lead me to conclude that such learning communities are rare, and increasingly harder to create in our current context of stringent accountability. Further, I question whether administrators have the skill set necessary to model learning designed to further individual, inter-personal, and organizational capacities.

Collaboration

Collaboration was an assumed factor in virtually all participants' definitions of a professional learning community. For Brent, the principal, the concept of collaboration and teamwork was foundational to the definition. "To me, a professional learning community is, first and foremost, about collaboration and teamwork. And it's about people working together to learn together to help students learn, to help each other learn." Brent's rationale for this teamwork emphasis reflects the work of Hargreaves (2002) in speaking of how teacher isolation cannot meet the needs of today's educational environment:

> There is more and more pressure for schools to do more all the time, and you need to realize that you cannot work in isolation in today's educational environment and see real success with students. You need to depend upon other people. You need to work with other people. At Goldenview in the Jr. High program we have curricula specialists, so we have an LA specialist, we have a SS teacher, a math teacher, a science teacher. For those teachers to look at students in isolation they only see one aspect of that student. Maybe a student who struggles in math and does very well in every other subject area. And so I think it's important that the staff realize that there's more to this student's life than that and that they need to work together to help Joshua succeed.

Although the principal believed that teamwork was foundational to student success, the teachers held differing views. While there was consensus among participants

that collaboration was a good thing, there was considerable difference in how collaboration was defined. Several viewed it as sharing across common levels or subjects, primarily in terms of sharing resources. These teachers measured the value of collaboration in terms of how it met more immediate needs, such as day-to-day lesson planning.

In terms of more school-wide collaboration, teachers related instances that were more student-centered than teacher-centered, such as having junior high students help with elementary classes. When questioned about it, several acknowledged the merit of working towards more school-wide teacher collaboration of teachers, but there was not a general understanding of the "how" and "why" behind this goal. My observation of the diversity of programs and people in a school spanning ten grades prompts me to conclude that such complexities can lead to teacher uncertainty regarding the rationale and framework for school-wide collaboration.

Initiation of a Professional Learning Community Model

This second section moves beyond participants' definitions of the term to address the question of how professional learning community models are initiated. Two main themes emerged from the data regarding initiation of such a model, the concept of perceived need and benefit, and the importance of trust and time in establishing a professional learning community model.

Perceived Need and Benefit

Brent firmly believed that people had to perceive a need for change before it could happen. As a principal, he saw a professional learning community developing by "showing, demonstrating, whatever phrase you want to use to people, that there is a need to work together and that we can do more."

Rhoda provided a teacher's perspective on the necessity of establishing a perceived need. In regard to Goldenview's situation, she related how frequent principal changes combined with a more veteran staff had affected teacher community. Rhoda spoke of how teachers at Goldenview had found ways to meet their own needs and make connections, often seeking sources and colleagues outside of the school:

> So, I think the function of the PLC that they've been doing is taken outside of the school, is taken outside of the inclusiveness of the whole

> school… And so the communities that they've involved in are evolving around that, so they're finding connections and have built those up. And so that takes away a need. If the need were there and these were all new teachers, I think that the community might be more developed.

She went on to share the importance of not only establishing a perceived need, but of a perceived benefit for educators and students:

> So, they're very well-intentioned people but I think that the culture has taken them another way and someone would have to bring in a really strong motive for them to get enthusiastic about it. There's not a sense of – I won't do it – or there's not a sense of reluctance. There's a sense of – I'm not putting my enthusiasm here; I'm not putting my maximum energy here. Or, this is not something I've chosen. It's something that you're still saying that we need, so, okay, I'll try it – and when you get that kind of attitude you don't get the momentum that needs to build up, because it needs to be an exciting time. It needs to be something that gives and gives and gives to the teachers, and I don't think they perceive that that's what they'll get.

While participants agreed on the importance of perceived need in establishing a professional learning community model, the question many had was regarding who should initiate and manage such a model. Debate in the educational literature continues about the role of leadership in the initiation process of change. Fullan (2001) contends that top-down change does not work, but that bottom-up initiatives often lack success as well, particularly when they fail to connect with the authority structure.

Although not supporting a top-down approach, two participants spoke specifically about the importance of the administrator taking the initial steps in establishing a professional learning community. Lana contrasted top-down policy implementation of the past to a more recent trend of listening to the voices of teachers, suggesting that the manner of presentation is key:

> If you present it that we *are* going to do something, well, you're going to have resistance right away. If you present it in a manner that this *will* help us become better teachers, administrators, better people overall, and

> present it in that kind of mode and continue to relate to it in *all* your literature and *all* that you talk about and say within the school, then I think people will buy in.

Participants agreed that the best way to initiate a professional learning community model was to demonstrate perceived need and benefit, yet there was not a clarity regarding who should do this and how it should be done. The dilemma was how it could be "shown" or "demonstrated" without appearing top-down. Yet, as participants noted, without good leadership from the principal, a model like this cannot be initiated. Brent's beliefs about demonstrating a perceived need led him to take slower steps in the initiation stages than how he saw others schools in his district proceeding. He believed that his teachers were at different ends of the spectrum in terms of willingness to participate in such a model, and he felt a better chance of success by moving slowly.

Based on my own lived experience as an administrator, coupled with observations at Goldenview over a five-month period, I would suggest that Brent might have better utilized other staff members to help provide leadership in this area. Perceptions of teachers more knowledgeable about the notion of professional learning communities indicated that with the help of some early initiators, and others who were more familiar with such models, he may have been able to more efficiently mobilize a critical mass of teachers to model and assist in demonstrating the perceived need and benefit.

Trust and Time

The importance of trust and the time required to develop this trust is the second theme related to initiation of a professional learning community model. Brent spoke passionately about the necessity of building trust with teachers in his role as an administrator:

> There's a few battles I have to do to demonstrate to my teachers that I'm trustworthy. I have to stand up for them with parents and you have to be willing to do that, especially when you're new, because you have to establish trust and you have to establish that there is relationship there that we can work with. And once that's done, then they're more open to the idea of some change in working together.

In teachers' minds this trust is not easily or quickly developed. Participants shared about the length of time required for an administrator to develop this kind of trust with staff members, and then in turn to promote this same degree of trust between staff members. One participant stated that sometimes this trust never develops. Rhoda addressed Goldenview's current situation by referring to the element of time, speaking of the ongoing turnover of administrators as making it difficult to develop a sense of community. She perceived that in the fourth year of an administrator's tenure, "you'll see the pay-off. And the principals in this school have been here less than that time, and so they haven't had the opportunity to do that."

The two participants who commented on the importance of trust in the change process both alluded to the importance of the "intimate" moments. In this view, trust is not developed in whole school staff meetings or large-scale planning events, such as creating a school mission statement. Rather, these teachers believed it develops on a much smaller scale. As Rhoda aptly put it in regard to administration, "They would also have to – I keep saying time, time, time – but they would also have to take the time for conversations."

Both administrators and all teacher participants were aware of the "trust" issue and the time associated with building trust. Brent realized the challenge of the Goldenview context and this affected his style and pace of implementation. Implicit in Brent's remarks was the belief that "standing up for teachers" is major part of trust-building. From a teacher's perspective, Rhoda pointed out that the important thing is the "conversations," as she believed that this is where teachers come to feel valued and empowered. Based on participants' accounts and my observations, I am led to believe that empowerment for Goldenview teachers was not necessarily defined as having a voice in big policy decisions, or in being invited to participate in the creation of mission statements, but in having the principal build relationship and trust through acknowledging the professional and personal identities of teachers.

Implementation of a Professional Learning Community Model

The third and final section of this chapter examines factors that influence implementation of professional learning communities. Fullan (2001) defines "implementation" as "the process of putting into practice an idea, program, or set of

activities and structures new to the people attempting or expected to change" (p. 69), while "initiation" is defined as "the process leading up to and including the decision to proceed with implementation" (p. 69).

Because the relationship between initiation and implementation is often loosely connected and interactive (Fullan, 2001), the theme of "trust and time" dealt with under the second section also has meaning for the implementation stage. Other themes to be discussed related to implementation are the role of principal leadership, time and resources, the embeddedness of change, and the recognition of individuality.

Trust and Time Required

The need for trust and the time required to build this trust was evident in teachers' responses to principal succession at Goldenview. Teachers perceived the frequent administrative turn-over in different ways. For some, there was a sense of resignation. As noted by one participant:

> Others are saying – I've done this before. I've put a lot of energy into something and then it's fallen flat because the key person in that has left. And so I'm going to put my energies into other areas. And I think those things combined as part of the history get not an overt mistrust, but a sense of – I'll do what I have to do, but I'm going to put my energy into something that's chosen by me, and that's not to make the community – So, there's not a reluctance or any negative tone. It's just that there's a sense that – I don't need this anymore because I've found other ways.

Based on my own lived experience and research observations, this type of response reflects the perpetuation of a top-down mentality, where change is directed by a leader; once that leader leaves, the momentum is gone. Further, I would argue that such change is motivated more by the leader's vision rather than an outlook that involves all participants in building a collective vision.

One participant commented that frequent principal succession allowed teachers the opportunity to avoid change in teaching practices. Another participant felt that change in administration really had no effect on teaching practice, as teachers' professionalism always had, and always would, encourage teaching practices that served the needs of students.

These attitudes clearly created a challenge for Brent in implementing a model where trust and teamwork are foundational. Brent was well aware of this challenge, and spoke often of his desire to create an environment of teamwork and collaboration at Goldenview. In addition, he realized the importance of not rushing the implementation stage. Brent and Lana's administrative decision not to use the formal language of professional learning community in the initial stages of implementation was done with respect for the notion of trust and time.

Hargreaves (2005a) states that creation of sustainable change in a school takes a minimum of four to five years. In discussing her research, Miller (1998) describes the "conversations" about practice, beliefs, and values that took place over ten years in the four schools studied, concluding that there are no shortcuts in transforming teaching culture. Considering that Brent was in the third year of his tenure as principal, and that three years was the longest tenure of any principal in Goldenview's thirteen-year history, it was not difficult to see why teachers felt that sustainable change was an elusive entity at this school.

A range of views reflected the Goldenview teachers' level of trust in the principal and belief in his ability to implement such a model. Brent was aware of these beliefs and took them into consideration when creating a plan for implementation. He acknowledged and accepted the unlikelihood that any administrator will get complete trust from his/her full staff. In fact, Brent himself believed that some staff members would probably never fully trust him, based upon their experiences with other principals. My own experience as an administrator, together with my research at Goldenview, prompts me to question the point at which administrators should move ahead with those who have placed confidence in them, and how to respond to others who have not reached this point.

Principal Leadership

In addition to developing and maintaining a spirit of trust, participants mentioned other aspects that highlighted the role of principal leadership in respect to implementation of a professional learning community model. Rhoda commented how "an administrator affects everything that happens in the school by setting the tone, by providing support, or by setting up roadblocks." She also described the qualities of a principal necessary to implement a professional learning community model:

> I think that the research is quite clear that for professional learning communities to work, the principal must value the model, become involved, and model it in his/her administrative style. The principal must be there along with the teachers, participating and collaborating if the model is going to go forward. If I have understood what the literature says, it is crucial that the principal be involved if the model is going to be successfully implemented.

A few participants commented on the importance of the principal becoming fully involved in the model, rather than just "directing." Principal leadership, for people like Rhoda, entailed an enthusiasm and energy that modeled as much by "doing" as by "telling." Comments from these teachers point to a challenge for administrators, who are affected by the same time pressures as teachers, especially within a system of site-based management – how do administrators take time for their own learning when so much time is spent in facilitating the collaboration and learning of others? Based on my own experience as an administrator, I am also led to question whether principals are adequately prepared and trained to both lead and model new educational initiatives.

Time and Resources

In the previous section a participant expressed how an administrator affects implementation of a professional learning community model by providing support or setting up roadblocks. Teacher participants interpreted this largely in terms of time and resources. Paul expressed a strong belief that time had to be allotted for development of a professional learning community model. He shared about attending a conference and learning about innovative ideas for student groupings, which then allowed for teacher collaboration time. Paul viewed such creativity in structures as a sign that a school was making development of a professional learning community a priority, and that people would see that, "Yes, our school is taking this concept seriously."

Rhoda spoke of the need to build in time for application, evaluation, and discussion when implementing a professional learning community model. Participants were well aware of the financial resources required to provide time and training for such a new model. As Susan succinctly stated, "The expectations have changes. We don't have the money."

A major element of the labour dispute occurring during my data collection period at Goldenview involved number of instructional minutes, with teachers hoping for a cap on this time. Thus, it was no surprise that the provision of time and other resources for implementation of a professional learning community model was a strongly recurring theme for teachers. To them, it spoke of how administration at the school and district level, and policy makers at the provincial level, were willing to support schools and teachers in development of professional learning community models. A few teachers had had opportunity to view innovative ways of dealing with the shortage of time and resources, and were interested in pursuing such ideas at Goldenview.

As an administrator, Brent did not speak as strongly about the lack of time and resources for implementation of a professional learning community model. The element of time seemed a more critical factor for teachers than the principal at Goldenview, especially when teachers spoke of their number of instructional minutes as being among the highest in the province. This finding was strengthened by my observation that during a period of limited financial resources, Brent was more committed to spending money on publicly visible aspects like reduced class sizes and technology, rather than allocating resources to development of a professional learning community model.

The frequent changes in administrative leadership, along with the current administration, were critical issues for participants in regards to implementation of a professional learning community model. This was reflected in teachers' views about the trust and time required to implement such a model, in how the principal sets the tone through his/her modeling and mentoring, and in how the principal demonstrates a commitment to a professional learning community model through allocation of resources.

Embeddedness of Change

Participants perceived the current educational context of financial constraint as influencing implementation of a professional learning community model. The current state of education was also a factor in participants' desire to see the professional learning community model "embedded" into the work of the school. This was expressed most strongly by the administrators. Both Brent and Lana were aware that teachers were tired of what Fullan (2001) terms "the imposition of multiple, disconnected reform initiatives" (p. 115), and did not want this to be seen as another "add-on." This was also a part of the

administrators' deliberate decision not to inundate teachers with the terminology of professional learning communities.

Lana spoke of how some other schools in the district had successfully embedded professional learning community models into their school culture, noting that sometimes other initiatives are slowed down or stopped to allow building of a good foundation for such a model. When asked about his vision for the future, Brent shared his goal of having a philosophy of teamwork and collaboration "permeate" everything that the school does.

Administrators at Goldenview saw embeddedness of the professional learning community model as one of the keys to implementation, and to this end, tried not to speak to it with staff as a new initiative. Yet, it is interesting that one teacher who was quite knowledgeable about professional learning communities expressed a different opinion, feeling it was necessary to name and define such a model to really move things forward.

Goldenview participants perceived a professional learning community model in different ways. For some it was the foundation upon which other initiatives rested, while for others, it was seen as an initiative in its own respect. Based upon my study in this school, I would argue that schools that engage in this model must wrestle with the question of whether it is a something you *do*, or something you *are*, or a combination of doing and being. My lived experience and research lead me to believe that how this question is answered will greatly affect the way a professional learning community model is implemented.

Recognition of Individuality

In addition to the nature of principal leadership and the perceived embeddedness of change, a final factor in relation to implementation of a professional learning community model was the recognition of teacher individuality. Lana noted the importance and challenge of recognizing this individuality within a collaborative framework. She asserted, "You have to have a strong guiding factor within you to have everyone come together and be of likemindedness, yet still show your individuality." Lana had an interesting perspective in that she had taught all grades from three to nine during her ten years at Goldenview, and was presently teaching both grade three and

junior high. Because of her collegial relationships with teachers throughout the school, she had an awareness of both the elementary and junior high cultures.

Goldenview was "created" when an elementary school and a junior high school were re-formed to make two K-9 schools. Thus, the elementary and junior high staffs each had their own history and culture when they moved into a new building thirteen years previously. In her administrative role, Lana used the strength of her relationships with teachers throughout the school to recognize the diversity of staff members. In acknowledging different ways of defining professional learning communities, Lana highlighted the importance of teachers' individuality:

> Yet I may speak of professional learning communities differently than my colleague who teaches in grade six because of her experiences and what she's doing with her students at that time. But at the end of the year, at the end of looking at what we've done personally and in our professional growth plans, it should be similar.

Rhoda addressed individuality in more democratic terms, asserting the importance of teachers knowing "that their voice is welcome and that someone is hearing what they're saying and taking it into consideration and fitting it into the plan…You'd want to welcome everyone who wishes to speak." The interconnection of this type of environment to the earlier-discussed factors of trust and principal leadership was crucial to these two participants.

Based on participants' accounts and my observations, I would argue that the factors perceived by teachers as affecting the implementation process of a professional learning community model must be visualized as a more web-like schema rather than a linear process. Huffman and Hipp (2003) also contend that the creation of a professional learning community cannot be expected to follow a linear course because of the multitude of factors that must be addressed.

Although teacher autonomy was addressed by several participants, it was not strongly connected to implementation of a professional learning community model, except by two participants. One spoke of how individuality would provide variances to a model, while still seeking a common end, whereas another participant emphasized the importance of welcoming and acknowledging all voices. It seems that most participants

viewed the professional learning community model as a unifying factor rather than a model encouraging or even allowing conflict or struggle.

This contrasts with the work of Achinstein (2002) and Uline, Tschannen-Moran, and Perez (2003), who argue the importance of constructive conflict within schools as a means of promoting individual and organizational learning and growth. Observations of Goldenview's teachers indicated that conflict among teachers was rarely viewed in a positive way, especially within the concept of "community" with its overt emphasis on shared systems of meaning. However, a branch of the educational literature (Achinstein, 2002; Westheimer, 1999) contends that for authentic community to develop, it is important to work through the process of encouraging and acknowledging all voices, not just the voices that assert "power" within the community.

Summary

The first research question in my study examined educators' understanding and expectations of a professional learning community model. I organized key findings and interpretations for this question under the headings of definition, initiation, and implementation of a model.

Participants with more extensive knowledge of professional learning community models viewed them as a unified way to bring good teaching practices to the forefront, thereby assisting in teacher knowledge-building and growth. Those with less knowledge of such models perceived them as naming practices that good teachers were already doing. All participants saw collaboration as positive, although there was variance in the definition of the term. A majority of participants identified effective principal leadership as a key factor in initiation and implementation of such a model. Effective leadership was defined as demonstrating a perceived need and benefit for the model, establishing an environment of trust, embedding the model so that it is not perceived as an add-on, and recognizing the time involved to do all these steps. Teachers also placed great importance on the allocation of time and resources for implementation of such a model.

My first indication of the complexity of Goldenview's culture was the variance in definition and understanding of a professional learning community model. Through a thirteen-year and five-principal school history, a strong core of skilled veteran teachers had sought ways to meet their professional needs without consistent administrative

direction. Adding the dynamic of a unique school origin where many teachers had formed collegial relationships prior to moving to Goldenview, the present principal faced a significant challenge in his efforts to build a school-wide professional learning community.

Chapter Five

Benefits and Challenges to Professional and Personal Identity

The purpose of this chapter is to present findings and interpretations related to the second research question: What are educators' perceptions of how their sense of identity is affected by participation in a professional learning community model? Findings related to benefits and challenges are shared.

Benefits to Professional and Personal Identity

The first section of this chapter reports how educators' professional and personal identity is positively impacted by participation in a professional learning community model. The themes in this first section include shared systems of meaning, self-confidence, risk-taking, synergy, learning, and professionalism.

Shared Systems of Meaning

As participants spoke of the benefits of participation in such a model, the first image noted was the perception of a professional learning community as a cultural metaphor (Morgan, 1998). Responses with terms like "collaboration", "sharing", "interdependence", and "common focus" evoked the value seen in creating and enacting shared systems of meaning.

Breaking up the isolation factor. Several participants alluded to how professional identity is strengthened by developing common goals and creating a culture of shared values. For some participants, particularly those more knowledgeable about professional learning community models, this was viewed in terms of how collaboration challenged the norm of teacher isolation (Lortie, 1975).

Rhoda viewed the professional learning community model as addressing teacher isolationism, and saw this as a strong motivating factor for teachers to embrace this model. "It becomes a model that the teachers are involved in willingly because it gives back to them something that they've been missing and it gets rid of the isolation." Her comments reflect Starratt's (2003) view of how the individual is strengthened through participation in community. Both administrators expressed a similar sentiment. Brent spoke of it in terms of a "team concept" and an "interdependency model":

> Teaching is a very isolating profession…So, I think when you can get to the place that you recognize that you really are an interdependent being and need that interdependency – in other words, you need and do better when you have the strength of others combined with yours – I think that's the benefit of professional learning community for staff.

Pragmatic impact. For most teachers, an "interdependency model" was valued more for its pragmatic impact on teacher identity than its ability to inspire shared values. Teachers pointed to the efficiency and the easing of stress created by a collaborative environment as major benefits of professional learning community models. This was considered especially important for the lives of newer teachers. Nadine, a fourth-year teacher who, because of her specialty, ended up teaching almost all the students in the school, shared the importance of being able to discuss her students with their classroom teachers. This was helpful for her classroom management. She spoke of how collaboration "takes some of the weight off your own shoulders" when "you can share the load amongst a few people…And I think, also, as a teacher, it helps because it broadens your base of ideas and resources. That way you're not having to come up with everything on your own." Nadine stated how learning from other people had been a very good thing for the first few years of her career.

Wendy, another younger teacher, spoke emphatically about her belief in the importance of sharing resources, and in the efficiency it created. She had found most teachers at Goldenview very willing to share resources, but felt that even more could be done. "And, like I said, if there were no more filing cabinets in classrooms, if they were all part of the school, that would benefit kids immensely." Nias' (1998) developmental approach to teacher identity is evidenced in the value that these newer teachers placed on practical and emotional assistance in reference to collegial relationships.

Some teachers at Goldenview saw how shared systems of meaning could benefit their self-identity by breaking down walls of isolation. Teachers less familiar with professional learning community models perceived benefits to themselves through collaboration. These included easing of stress and creating greater efficiency, thus reducing time pressures. Understanding and desire for shared systems of meaning ranged in depth for participants, depending upon their values and the perceived benefit. Those

Goldenview teachers who saw value in reducing isolationism were the ones willing to forge new relationships.

In my study the pragmatic element of collaboration was perceived primarily as a way to help newer teachers "survive." Several veteran teachers in the study also related the value of their informal collaborative relationships, where spontaneous meetings in the hallway between classes were an important part of sharing teaching practice. A natural pattern of sharing was built into selective collegial relationships. In the case of Goldenview, a number of teachers had collegial relationships prior to the inception of the school; these had been continued and in many cases strengthened by moving together from an elementary or junior high school to a K-9 school.

Experienced teachers at Goldenview were adept at finding the types of collaborative relationships necessary to improve their practice and thus enhance their professional identity. This further illustrates Nias' (1998) findings in relation to teachers seeking out collegial relationships during the course of their career that will preserve a stable sense of personal and professional identity. Huberman's (1993) teacher as "independent artisan" model also reflects the desire of teachers to selectively collaborate with peers. One veteran teacher described his collaborative practice as a series of contacts outside his own school, speaking of the freedom he had to seek out assistance as needed. "I just happen to know a lot of people in all kinds of areas of education. I take advantage of it. I say, 'Hey, I'm stuck.'"

My own experience and research, however, lead me to question how these self-chosen relationships within and outside of the school may also serve to inhibit the formation of school-wide community through their potential for exclusivity. Goldman and Tindal's (2002) research attests to how these subcultures or minicommunities provide great satisfactions and strong attachments, meeting some important individual needs. They also emphasize how the emotional identification with the minicommunity often comes at the expense of attachment and commitment to the larger community (p. 114).

Self-confidence

There was general agreement among Goldenview staff that self-confidence was affected through participation in a professional learning community model. For most

teachers, this was expressed in the affirmation received by others when resources or ideas were shared. A veteran teacher spoke of sharing his resources with a colleague last year, and of the personal feeling associated with it. "If someone uses my stuff, I'd feel good about it…It's kind of like a little star or something, right?"

A younger teacher related a similar boost in confidence connected to collaboration. "It's given me more confidence in knowing that some of the things I'm implementing, other teachers are using as well, and that it's working." Another teacher spoke of the personal gratification in having one's ideas listened to and thought to be worthwhile, and how it gave him the confidence to move on.

Lana talked of the growth in this area that she had observed in some veteran teachers at Goldenview. "The conversations and also the enlightenment within their teaching styles and how they feel about themselves in their profession has and does change." She related the story of one teacher's growth in self-confidence:

> There's one person in particular, who's now a division leader, who was always in the background, was sort of the little brother in the shadow of everybody else; even though this person's a veteran teacher, there are teachers who are a little bit more experienced than this person. And so, that person follows that group – they are sort of groupies. So the last couple of years specifically, that person has come up and stepped up and grown and been more comfortable, and has taken on and started some new courses for our complementary courses, and just enjoys it. So, we're reaching some of them. Others we just need to keep working at. It's like they're a mountain and inside the mountain there are some wonderful geodes that want to come out and sparkle, but they're so well-hidden that we need to slowly pick at them until they're just ready to shine away.

A few participants exposed another aspect of self-confidence by speaking of vulnerability. Brent referred to this in connecting how a professional learning community model helps individuals to relate to others as they were designed to – in the nature of social beings who need to learn to depend on others and at times exhibit vulnerability. Susan spoke wistfully about how this belief would impact the current teaching environment:

> How can you go against things that would be great like the genuineness? Like, I've got an art idea? Do you want to use it next week? Like, people getting to know who I really am?...And it's that admitting that you don't have it all and you are human.

There was general agreement among Goldenview staff that self-confidence was affected through participation in a professional learning community model. Most teachers expressed this in terms of the affirmation received by others when resources or ideas were shared. The administrators spoke of it more deeply in describing the far-reaching effects of growth in self-confidence. They addressed community as a "way of being," rather than isolated actions that provide momentary connections.

This notion again raises the question of whether teachers perceive professional learning communities as something that can be defined as a series of steps or actions toward an ultimate end, or whether teachers view such communities as a way of living that permeates beyond outward practice. It appears that the administrators at Goldenview more easily embraced this latter cultural perspective. Goldenview teachers, on the other hand, more often viewed a professional learning community model in terms of identifiable actions and practices, such as sharing of ideas or resources.

Risk-taking

Rhoda, a veteran teacher, had a perspective more similar to the administrators. She also seemed to understand professional learning communities as a "way of being," expressing the belief that as self-confidence grows, so, too, does the willingness to take risks with one's professional practice. Rhoda recounted an example from her own practice to illustrate the benefits and rewards of risk-taking within community. In this case, she found her own "professional learning community" outside of school through e-mail, and used this "community" as a support network for technology integration in her classroom:

> So now I'm quite comfortable with the risk-taking that comes in there and know that I'm likely to fall on my face in these areas, but if I do this and this, then it's not going to be bad. I won't be destroyed in my classroom and I can go ahead…And even in the risk-taking that I do, when I try a

> new thing, I've been about the side benefits. If it doesn't work out the way I want for them, what can we learn from that?

For this teacher, risk-taking was all about her desire to learn and grow in her own practices. At Goldenview, willingness to take risks was a test of self-confidence, particularly in a profession like teaching which is often bound by holding to practices that have proven true. Observations and participants' accounts also emphasized that it was easier to take these risks with a learning community outside of Goldenview School, where the politics of school culture did not play a role; it appeared that in these situations teachers were freer to be themselves.

Underlying this building of self-confidence and risk-taking was the belief that a professional learning community model would provide the supportive environment necessary for these endeavours. Participants saw that this supportive environment would impact teachers in two ways. First of all, Rhoda saw that the building of trust and confidence in each other would provide a sense of support, particularly during stressful times. Secondly, Brent saw that the environment of a professional learning community would encourage teachers to relate to others as they were designed to – in the nature of social beings who need to learn to depend on others and at times exhibit vulnerability. This echoes the work of Starratt (2003) and his emphasis on humans' innate desire for community:

> The more mature community embraces the community of humanity, the community of life, and the community of being, and finds through that bonding an increased wisdom and strength that are the seeds of its own transformation. (p. 86)

Synergy

Participants also saw the new energy created by participation in a professional learning community as benefiting both professional and personal identity. Rhoda talked of this in terms of a "synergetic effect." She described it as "the excitement of talking about something that is of common interest and sharing the learnings of that," feeling that an environment could be created which was challenging, yet fun and supportive. Wendy expressed how collaboration and sharing were energizing for herself as a teacher and an

individual. She also described it in terms of creating "happier" teachers, which could only benefit students as a result.

A few participants spoke of the new energy created by participation in a professional learning community, thus benefiting teachers and their students. Energy was equated with excitement and happiness. Working in such a community was seen as positively impacting teachers' self-identity; however, teachers often referred to common interests or collaboration around common subjects when describing this community. Their comments prompt me to question whether this same energy can be generated when it is a school-directed rather than a self-initiated activity.

Learning

While responses about benefits of participation in a professional learning community model were most often phrased in terms of "cultural" or "community" images, several participants, namely those with more knowledge about such models, did make reference to the concept of "learning" as a significant benefit to teachers' identity.

Increased awareness of self as learner. Participants saw increased awareness of self as a learner as an important factor. Rhoda noted that as skills came to the conscious level, the connection between knowledge and practice became more important. Although aware of some veteran teachers' skepticism of anything "new," she still felt that a professional learning community model had something to offer them:

> Even if it's only the ability to re-think what they've been doing and to verbalize it, much like you do a student teacher. To make visible all those things about why you do it and when you do it, and how it fits with your learning…I think teachers are stronger if they know the reasons why.

Rhoda's comments about learning reflect the importance that Mitchell and Sackney (2000) place on professional narrative – encouraging teachers to engage in honest critical reflection that will reveal one's espoused theory and one's theory-in-use.

Life-long learning. Lana saw a professional learning community model as developing professional identity through promotion of life-long learning. She, herself, was a life-long learner as was evident in her visible enthusiasm for the books, materials, and conferences about which she shared during interviews and other conversations.

Rhoda spoke about how involvement in professional learning communities impacted her own personal learning experience:

> For me, it moves me from a plane as an isolated person who looks at my thinking in a very narrow way, and it broadens it out and opens up the world to me to say there are other possibilities and other ideas and I can gain from them.

Collective learning. The "learning" of a professional learning community was also perceived on a collective level as the community furthered their learning together through mutual support. Wendy highlighted the interactive nature of this growth as she commented on growth between teachers in their own knowledge as they learn from each other. Her perceptions mirror Mitchell and Sackney's (2000) belief that personal and interpersonal capacities of knowledge-building should be developed simultaneously.

Participants with greater knowledge of professional learning community models viewed teacher learning within such models as a benefit to self-identity, even for veteran teachers. They described this in terms of a greater consciousness of self as learner and an attitude of life-long learning. The ongoing and simultaneous learning of the individual and the collective was also noted as a benefit to self-identity.

How learning was viewed as impacting personal and professional identity reflected teachers' beliefs about whether learning was valued more as an individual or collective activity. It also emphasized beliefs about whether and how teacher knowledge and learning should be brought into the open. Arguably, this is an area in which teachers have not always been encouraged and supported. On the other hand, Huberman's (1993, p. 17) "teacher as artisan" model argues that because of the highly idiosyncratic nature of teaching, articulated awareness of teaching practice among colleagues does not necessarily impact teaching and learning. Teachers at Goldenview again seemed divided on the issue, based upon their knowledge of and experience with professional learning community models.

Professionalism

Participants described the above themes of shared systems of meaning, self-confidence, risk-taking, synergy, and learning as benefiting teachers' professional and personal identity. Together, these themes might be seen as strengthening teacher

professionalism in a cultural metaphor of organization (Morgan, 1998). Yet, much debate currently surrounds the subject of teacher professionalism. Louis, Kruse, and Bryk (1995) discuss the competing notions of professionalism:

> Where professional community is an element of the definition of professionalism, it is often synonymous with promoting strong national professional associations whose role is to uphold privileges and responsibilities. The community literature, in contrast, presents an image that emphasizes personal connection (p. 14).

It is this "connection" aspect that was highlighted by participants who saw the potential benefits to professional and personal identity through participation in such a model.

Not surprisingly, participants held some strong sentiments around this topic. Although all participants spoke of the committed and skilled teaching staff at Goldenview, there was a vision by some that participation in a professional learning community model could further enhance the individual and collective professional identities of teachers, in essence, as Rhoda stated, giving back to teachers something that they had been missing. Participants identified becoming a more well-rounded professional and increasing the sense of professionalism as two benefits to teacher identity.

The well-rounded professional. From an administrative viewpoint, Brent felt strongly that participation in a professional learning community model would help teachers become more well-rounded professionals, and thereby strengthen professional identity by confirming good teaching practice, reducing isolationism, and working for the benefit of students. Several others who were familiar with the theory behind professional learning community models echoed this same sentiment.

Reversing the decline of professionalism. From the viewpoint of a veteran teacher, Susan expressed how a professional learning community model could bring back professionalism into teaching. She saw it as creating a caring community of educators who had time to discuss the philosophy and psychology of educating children. This was something which she felt had been lost during her tenure in teaching, and which was also of great concern to her. For Susan, strengthening professionalism would impact not only professional identity, but personal identity as well. The erosion of professionalism during

her career had affected her personally, impacting her feelings of efficacy and self-worth. "I think I felt more of a professional 10 years ago. I felt more of a professional 15 years ago, 20 years ago, 25 years ago. I think that professionalism has been taken away from us."

Susan spoke of spending a sizable amount of time early in her career in a school with limited resources. Yet, she described it as, "the best part of my teaching career. I felt like I was the best I could ever be, then." Although Susan was not familiar with the term "professional learning community," she quickly connected the term and its characteristics to "the best years of my teaching career."

Brent, in his role as principal, saw teachers developing an increased sense of professional identity through participation in a professional learning community by becoming more well-rounded teachers. Susan felt similarly about the potential for increased professionalism, but commented that it would simply be returning to how things used to be. Teachers at Goldenview clearly had different interpretations of professionalism, just as is evident in society at large. For some, professionalism represented a governing body and a code meant to preserve order, boundaries, and often a hierarchy. In relation to professional identity, some Goldenview teachers interpreted this in terms of recognition of their professional judgment as worthy, rather than being *dictated to*. Other teachers also saw a collective element in professionalism, desiring a collaborative effort to improve teaching and learning; these were the teachers who more openly embraced a professional learning community model.

Summary

Teachers and administrators identified several ways in which professional and personal identity was positively impacted by participation in a professional learning community model. These were discussed under the themes of shared systems of meaning, self-confidence, risk-taking, synergy, learning, and professionalism. Responses were often related to the depth of participants' conceptual and practical knowledge about professional learning community models.

Some aspects, like the perceived benefit of collaboration, were agreed upon by all, yet how deeply collaboration and other shared systems of meaning impacted personal and professional identity were viewed differently. For several teachers, benefits were

measured in a pragmatic and immediate way. "How will this help me in the here and now?" was a concern to many, again illustrating the difference between viewing a learning community as "doing" or "being."

Those participants who moved beyond immediate needs displayed a longer-term perspective. They viewed it more as a transformation of school culture, where self-identity was inextricably linked to the collective. The themes of self-confidence, risk-taking, synergy, and learning illustrated this perspective . Such a belief exemplifies an understanding of the communitarian theory (Merz & Furman, 1997) underlying most professional learning community models. This leads me to question educators' understanding of the relationship between theory and practice and the impact that this perceived relationship has on teachers' sense of their professional and personal identity. At Goldenview, many of these connections were driven by lack of time and resources. The overwhelming emphasis on pragmatic benefits seen in professional learning communities points to this deficiency.

Challenges to Professional and Personal Identity

The second section of this chapter reports on findings of how professional and personal identity is challenged by participation in a professional learning community model. Many of the challenges shared by participants referred to not only their own personal experience, but what they perceived to be the feelings of their colleagues.

A dominant perspective was the "uncomfortableness" created by change, especially the type of changes involved in a professional learning community model with increased emphasis on collaboration and de-privatization. As Brent commented, some teachers feel that "we don't want our world to change, because if I know the way the world is, I'm safe. I'm okay. People have a hard time with change. And adults have a really hard time with change." From a teacher's perspective, Paul saw that "any time there's change, it's going to cause some concern," especially because "teaching can be isolating, and in the past it's been very common for somebody to go into the room and close the door, and another adult doesn't see them until the end of the day."

Over and over I heard the common refrain, "Not everyone wants to collaborate," and, "You can't *force* people to collaborate." Several participants who perceived challenges to identity echoed this "uncomfortableness" with the collaborative foundation

of a professional learning community model. A number talked of increased vulnerability, a loss of individual identity in favour of collective identity, and a loss of power.

Vulnerability

Most participants noted the need for members of a professional learning community to display an increased level of vulnerability and that this had an impact on identity. Several participants viewed the communitarian nature of a professional learning community model, with a focus on interdependence (Kruse & Louis, 1999), as requiring a level of openness not common in the teaching profession. My study at Goldenview highlighted how the whole notion of "vulnerability," with its connotations of being open to attack or criticism, provides an interesting contrast with the concept of "profession," often associated with certain standards and codes of conduct. Participants saw this vulnerability as challenging personal and professional identity in a number of areas, including fear, risk, self-esteem, and pride.

Fear. Participants talked of being in the de-privatized environment of a professional learning community. One teacher stated that only about half of Goldenview's teachers would feel comfortable with an open-door policy encouraging inter-visitation of classrooms. When asked the reason why, the participant suggested that there is a certain paranoia associated with having one's classroom observed:

> I think in some ways some of us have been, probably the old school, the only time we see these people is when we're in trouble, right? And suddenly they're coming in and I think it's human nature – you don't feel natural…I think that people just haven't gotten over that aspect.

Lana also spoke about teachers' fear of being judged and how this caused people to put up walls.

Paul associated some of this fear with lack of self-confidence. "Yes, I know some very good teachers who feel very uncomfortable about opening their doors to other people because they don't feel confident enough." Susan concurred in speaking of every school as having people who don't feel comfortable, who are not secure in themselves for whatever the reason.

Associated with this fear also comes the uncertainty of a new model that seems to have different rules. Lana addressed the uncertainty created for teachers when they "may

not know how to go about it. They're not sure. And I don't know how to ask that question or I'm not sure what question to ask and I don't want to offend anyone."

Participants attributed this fear of de-privatization to both personality and past experience. I observed that the references to fear were made by veteran teachers and often referred to veteran teachers. One would assume that the longer one's career, the more confident and competent one would feel; yet, my study suggests that this is not the case in the teaching profession.

Risk. Two veteran teachers both reflected upon the risk involved in sharing one's opinion and expressing concerns openly among Goldenview staff. One shared that stating an opinion about a particular policy "would really be opening yourself to criticism by many, many people." She emphasized the dangers of vulnerability in an open and collaborative environment.

The courage required to be an authentic voice again seemed to be more of a concern for some of the veteran teachers. Less experienced teachers appeared to have fewer preconceived ideas about school culture and collegial relationships within that culture. My study of the Goldenview culture leads me to speculate that veteran teachers have a deeper understanding of the complexity of the hierarchy and power relationships, and in turn are more affected by the micropolitical context, an aspect that will be discussed later in this chapter.

Self-Esteem. Another intersection of vulnerability and self-identity in a professional learning community model occurred in the area of self-esteem. Some participants saw a professional learning community model as involving ongoing individual and collective learning. These participants emphasized that in an environment of perpetual learning, teachers' identities as professionals would be constantly challenged as they reconciled their growing knowledge with their classroom practice. With such a challenge to professional identity, one's vision of self would also be impacted. Rhoda made this powerful connection:

> I think if it unveils things that you would rather not have unveiled, then it can be a very negative thing. I think that if you unveil things like perhaps, you find out that there are other ways that you might implement a strategy in L.A., and you're uncomfortable with implementing it, it might leave

> you with a lot of doubt and a lot of self-deprecation. So, if you're saying to yourself, "I should be doing this but I can't," it could be a blow to the self-esteem and it could also be a blow to your confidence level.

Such an observation suggests that the collaborative foundation of a professional learning community model provides increased opportunity for both positive and negative interactions. Little's (1990) "logic of confidence" is evident in Rhoda's comment, in that a privatized teaching practice is often seen as providing greater emotional safety.

Even if teachers have the personal capability to enact change in their practice, they may lack the time or resources needed to help them carry out these changes. Rhoda observed:

> I think most teachers are afraid of it because they're already overwhelmed. They know what they have to do and they're basically keeping their head above water, balancing their home life and their children and their work life, and so they don't have any more to give.

Goldenview participants who saw the ongoing challenge of individual and collective learning in a professional learning community connected this to a potential struggle with self-esteem. Pressure to change based on new learnings, along with a perceived inability to enact this change could lead to much self doubt. My research and lived experience support my belief that most educators prefer to live in a zone of emotional safety, and that to move teachers beyond this area of security is difficult.

Pride. In addition to fear, risk, and self-esteem, pride was another factor observed as affecting the vulnerability called for in a professional learning community model. Several participants noted that a genuine professional learning community requires true openness and authenticity. However, that "openness" was also perceived as a challenge to professional and personal identity. As Rhoda commented:

> How many people can truly say my life is an open book and I will genuinely tell you exactly what I'm thinking about these types of ideas and tell me what my failures are and get you to help me to rethink them and move them in another direction? It's not most people.

My observations and participants' comments indicated that the collaborative nature of a professional learning community is also affected by pride when it comes to

sharing of resources. Both newer and veteran teachers commented on how teachers sometimes have difficulty sharing materials that they have developed. A newer teacher made the following observation:

> I think teachers are hoarders. They like hoarding their things and they're packrats, and they get scared that people will steal it away or something. I think there's also that thought that, "I did all this work. I've made this unit for ten years. Why should I just give it to you?" Like I said, some teachers I have got that feeling from and some I haven't.

Participants noted the challenge of pride not only in sharing resources, but in asking for assistance and admitting that one doesn't know everything. Johnny reflected on how pride is often involved:

> First of all, you have to admit to yourself that you don't know everything. And don't be afraid to share that. You can turn around and tell someone, "You know, I'm not sure. I think I know someone who can give you a better answer. I'll get back to you in a day or two with that."… I think there's a lot of pride involved. I think that's a fair comment.

Participants expressed the vulnerability required to create a true sense of community in terms of the personal and professional fears to be addressed as well as the risk involved and courage required. Participants saw self-esteem and pride as other aspects of teacher identity that were affected by participation in a professional learning community model.

My study at Goldenview leads me to speculate that a model like this, which is perceived by teachers as "requiring" vulnerability, can serve to create more walls rather than breaking down existing barriers. Observations and participant comments indicate that, as a whole, these existing walls appear to be higher and stronger for veteran teachers. My time at Goldenview and my experience as a teacher and administrator lead me to conclude that these veteran teachers likely have more of themselves invested in the profession, and have established an identity where personal and professional are often inextricably linked.

Loss of Teacher Autonomy

Along with increased vulnerability, Goldenview participants perceived a loss of autonomy as a second challenge to personal and professional identity.

Teacher-student relationship. Mike, a veteran teacher, expressed that he found a major part of his professional identity in the teacher-student relationship. He perceived that the collaborative activities of a professional learning community model and the time that they required would take away from this focal point of his identity. Such a perspective echoes the work of Hargreaves, who found that innovative and highly successful Grade 7 and 8 teachers "put the establishment of the emotional bonds of engagement at the core of everything they did" (p. 61).

Even though the collegial activities of a professional learning community are focused on students in the sense of achievement, teachers like Mike felt that their sense of professional judgment was devalued in favour of a more collective identity.

Professional development. Another veteran teacher expressed this frustration regarding loss of autonomy in terms of mandated professional development activities:

> I don't like to be told what I have to go to. I mean, it might not benefit me at all. And I think as a professional I like to have choices or say, "This is what I need for professional development this year," and go seek what I can do to reach those goals. Instead of saying, "Here's what your PD is and here's what you're doing."

Rather than the type of community seen by Starratt (2003), where individuals are enriched through their involvement and interaction with others, some of these teachers were skeptical about how their professionalism would be affected through mandatory participation in school-directed professional development.

You "must"! Rhoda's concern regarding professional learning communities and teacher autonomy was the use of such words by Alberta Learning government documents that "every teacher must." She saw such language as failing to acknowledge that some teachers might already be involved in professional learning community activities, even if they were not school-based:

> I may seek other people who teach (in my area), and there's no one else in my school. So, were it to be mandated in the sense that it had to be

> directed by my principal, or directed by someone in the school, they might not be privy to what I have been involved in as a professional learning community. And I have seen instances where that has taken place...A school that I'm familiar with – a long-time friend of mine and teacher of a similar subject has been involved with me in a professional learning community for about ten years and is now being told that that will not qualify for a teacher goal which she needs to set. The principal was saying, "You must now go into inservicing on this and come back and be involved in OUR school community." And the inservicing that she is taking doesn't pertain to anything she's teaching. So, she feels it's an onerous situation.

Loss of individual identity. Several participants perceived a professional learning community's emphasis of collective over individual identity as negatively influencing teacher autonomy and self-identity. However, Brent had a different perspective from his role as an administrator. He linked these feelings to self-esteem, suggesting that a person's sense of self-identity coloured their perception:

> Studies would demonstrate particularly males, but, I think there are people who build much of their self-esteem not on who they are as a person, but on what they do. So, I'm a doctor, I'm a…whatever it might be. And I think that, for those people, I guess that's where my comment about personal identity being threatened. And I don't understand it, but I'm trying to speculate why some people might feel personally threatened by being part of a group which is part of a learning community and they maybe feel like they'll get lost in the group…I would guess that some people would say that I'm not Brent Jackson anymore. I'm Brent who teaches at Goldenview…I think the fear would be a loss of identity, the personal fear some people would have of being part of a professional learning community – I've lost my individual identity.

The current administrators at Goldenview placed a high value on collective identity and teamwork, yet some of the teachers, particularly more veteran ones, were not fully "buying in," and feared losing a piece of who they were as professionals. Given the

revolving-door nature of the principal's office, combined with the trust and time required to build a professional learning community, it was not surprising that those who had most invested would hold back. Rhoda spoke of how when Goldenview school opened, the new staff were seeking a school identity:

> And the fact that it wasn't there has brought in a trust and risk issue. "Because I don't know where I'm going, I'm going to set my own direction. Now that I've set my own direction and things are going fine, why should I change?"

Given this history, compounded by an "imposed" professional learning community model, the fears articulated by some Goldenview participants were not surprising.

Staff composition. When asked what Goldenview would look like as a professional learning community three years into the future, several participants said that it would depend upon who the staff members were. Veteran teachers spoke of the new infusion of energy that had come with new, young staff members in recent years. Some teachers indicated that the school culture would not really change until there had been some retirements and new teachers brought in.

Yet, one veteran teacher suggested that change did not have to be that difficult to attain, if only teachers were treated as "professionals":

> I think it's really wording and feeling and being treated in a respectful manner and being treated like a professional, so that we can make professional decisions. There are times – I don't like wasting my time – I'm doing certain things and I'm thinking, "We're doing this again?" Especially the veteran teachers.

Many teachers perceived loss of individual identity as a limitation of a professional learning community model, particularly in the sense of teacher autonomy lost through a mandated reform. A devaluing of professional judgment over what types of activities and relationships were now perceived as important signified this potential loss of autonomy.

At Goldenview, some of the veteran teachers expressed this sentiment more strongly than newer teachers. My observations and participant comments lead me to conclude that these teachers were more established in their practice and felt that they had

more to lose. Several participants commented that the culture of the school would not likely change until the staff composition had changed through the retirement of veteran teachers.

The origin of the school and the revolving principal door nurtured a strong sense of individual identity at Goldenview, as teachers actively sought and formed their own support networks both inside and outside of the school. To embrace the professional learning community model with its focus on a collective identity was not the desire of all teachers at Goldenview, particularly given the restraints on time and resources.

Loss of Power

Related to this loss of individual identity was the loss of power that some participants linked to participation in a professional learning community. Brent gave an interesting description of how the school was organized when he arrived three years ago:

> So, when I mentioned earlier the strong personalities on staff, what I saw was several staff who had built their little feudal kingdoms around themselves, either there were one or two isolated. Most were groups of two or three and it's kind of like we'll look after our area and our group of kids and we'll do very well. And the school *has* done very well academically. It's, as I mentioned, a very strong academic school. Very strong. So, they've done that well. And then there were a number of staff who basically showed up at the school, went into their room, and closed their door for the day. They didn't have anything to do with other staff.

Brent's goal was to create a more equitable community, and he related an incident that illustrated this desire:

> Some of the basic things I did when I went there – there were vast differences in supervision schedule. The few younger teachers, the less experienced teachers, some of them had vastly more amounts of supervision than some of the more experienced teachers had. There was a power group of experienced teachers that had set the timetable when I went there. They had set it to cater largely to their wishes and their desires and "to heck" with everyone else…This is the way classes are structured, and this is when I get them for gym, and this is when I get them for

> academics, or whatever happens. And this was a decision where there was not a consensus. I talked about what's good for all students in the school and what's best for all students and how we don't always get our own way…And I opened it up and had about 10 or 12 teachers help build the timetable that we still use. And certainly this little three was part of that, but they didn't get to run things their way…So, there were a couple of – I wouldn't even call them battles – I'd just say this is the way it is and the timetable was re-done to try and meet everyone's needs as equally as possible and the same with the supervision schedule.

Brent's desire to build a professional learning community at Goldenview led him to confront power relationships among staff. Sarason (1996) contends that "coming to grips with the realities of the school culture requires alterations in longstanding power relationships that will engender conflict and controversy," asserting that this kind of institutional change is "rough stuff" (p. 339).

Power of knowledge and influence. From a teacher's standpoint, Paul related how teachers seek a power of knowledge and a power of influence, and that power relationships change with each new administrator. A few participants acknowledged how a professional learning community attempts to create equity of voice, thus empowering some and taking away power from others. Susan related how Brent had come in and actually used his "power" to break up the power dynamics at Goldenview, which she described as a "very power-oriented school." She shared of the daily power issues such as the power in withholding knowledge:

> I know and I'm not going to share what I know. I know that Mrs. Brown has had problems with her Tommy for years and years and when Tommy was in my room I found out this about him. But when another teacher gets Tommy the next year, that information is never really shared…I see it as I have Tommy and Mary and Suzy in my room, and while I have them for those ten months, I will do everything possible in my power, to make sure that when they come out they will be absolutely the best that they can be.

Susan's example illustrates the importance of power inherent to some teachers' sense of professional autonomy, and how this desire for power can be a driving force. She also

related her feeling that this quest for power is driven only by professional identity, not personal.

From personality to profession to school environment. From her own experience, Wendy attributed teachers' desire to be in control primarily to personality, but also connected other factors such as the teaching profession and the school environment:

> Like even university, I found the education faculty very – teachers are a certain group of people. They're like perfectionists, but some very anal, uptight personalities. And you see that as a group, right?...I kind of see it as maybe their personality, them wanting to be in control and things like that puts them into the teaching profession, but that might be personality. But also the profession and the environment of the school might produce some of those personality traits.

Goldenview participants noted a variety of contextual factors that had shaped and molded their school culture. These included the school's origin, numerous principal changes, and the current make-up of staff, which included a significant number of veteran teachers. The participants themselves did not agree on the most significant factors affecting the present context. Regardless, the introduction of a professional learning community model resulted in an administrative effort to create more equitable power relationships, thus affecting both professional and personal identity. The literature suggests that such a model also expects a desired and democratic participation from all teachers, something quite difficult to attain in any kind of organization where power structures exist. Brent commented:

> And I think that's one of the weaknesses of the professional learning community model – that it has an underpinning philosophy that everybody does really want to participate and I'm not sure that everybody really does want to participate. I think sometimes people see it as a loss of personal power. I'm giving away my knowledge, or my family secrets about teaching, or whatever it is, and they see that as a loss of personal power, and really that's quite a finite power. They kind of operate in a "circle of concerns" instead of a "circle of influence."

Summary

Goldenview participants perceived that participating in a school-wide professional learning community model would lead to both benefits and challenges for educators. What proved interesting in my study was that what one educator saw as a challenge, another perceived to be a benefit. While one participant saw potential for fear and uncertainty, another saw an opportunity to learn new practices. While one saw self-esteem being challenged, another saw self-confidence being strengthened.

My case study at Goldenview, prompts me to conclude that any qualities seen as a benefit or limitation to self-identity can be taken to an unhealthy extreme at either end of the spectrum. This supports Tracy's (1998) contention that models can act as walls or windows. My research and lived experience lead me to argue that implementing a school-wide professional learning community model will bring change to the lives of most teachers. How educators at Goldenview evaluated that change is discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter Six

Manner in Which Educators Evaluate Professional Learning Community Models

The purpose of this chapter is to present findings related to the third research question: What is the manner in which educators evaluate models of professional learning community?

As discussed in Chapter 1 of the study, "professional learning community" is currently a popular notion in the policy arena and in professional literature. When defining this term for interview participants, some of whom were unfamiliar with the term, I used two main sources. As I conducted my study in Alberta, where the government has mandated that every school operate as a professional learning community, I utilized the definition from Recommendation #13 of Alberta's Commission on Learning (2003). It describes how teachers and administrators work jointly to share in learning and then act upon what they have learned, with the goal of high achievement and continuous improvement for all students.

The second source was the work of Louis and Kruse (1999), which, like Alberta's Commission on Learning (2003), emphasizes the need for teachers to work together in order to assume collective responsibility for student learning. I used Kruse and Louis' (1999) definition to characterize five conditions of a professional learning community model: shared norms and values, reflective dialogue, de-privatization of practice, collective focus on student learning, and collaboration. These characteristics are very similar to those found in some other professional learning community models (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 1997; Huffman and Hipp, 2003), although Kruse and Louis (1999) emphasize reflective dialogue as a way of promoting the growth of the individual and thus the collective. In establishing a professional learning community at Goldenview, the principal spoke of using the work of effective schools, which was also a focus of the school jurisdiction. The principal emphasized such values as shared vision, improved student learning, teamwork, and collaboration.

In analyzing the data related to how educators evaluate a professional learning community model, I found it helpful to list the questions inherent in each participant's comments from the individual and focus group interviews. These questions were then

analyzed and grouped together according to common themes (Appendix G). Based on my analysis of the data, I found three main themes that encompassed Goldenview participants' evaluation of a professional learning community model. These include philosophy and purpose, principal leadership and implementation, and contextual factors.

Philosophy and Purpose

One of the key themes was participants' understanding of how closely the model implemented at Goldenview reflected their personal beliefs, particularly in respect to philosophy of education and purpose of schooling.

Benefits to Students and Teachers

While all participants seemed to hold an underlying belief that such a model should first and foremost benefit students, as was reflected in both of the above definitions, this was emphasized most by the two administrators. Lana, the vice-principal, shared, "My forefront thought is – what's best for the students? And it always has been."

Rhoda, a veteran teacher, shared a similar viewpoint during the second focus group:

> PLC is another example that really makes me think about the effect and outcomes for kids. In your summary, just one out of seven of your comments even talks about the students. I feel that if I am going to become involved in PLC there has to be a positive effect on the learning of my students…I think the question that must be asked about any new idea or initiative has to be, "How does it affect student learning?"

The fact that teacher participants spoke less about student learning in terms of evaluating a professional learning community model than administrators may indicate that teachers automatically assumed this in their practice as professionals. However, given the labour situation at Goldenview, it may also be an indication that work conditions and the political context were critical factors during the time of my study.

Helping Teachers in Their Practice

While participants shared a common belief that a professional learning community model should ultimately benefit students by assisting teachers in their work, interpretations varied on what it meant to help teachers in their practice. Some measured

a professional learning community model in terms of how it promoted ongoing teacher learning. Lana spoke of her desire for teachers in regard to their attitude toward learning. "And it's not just I'm here and I'm finished my learning specifically. I'm going on and learning every single day."

Two veteran teachers expressed this learning in terms of rich collegial conversations. In promoting the potential for these conversations in a professional learning community, Rhoda talked about her experience in going back to university:

> Maybe share my experiences from being at university again, as 25 years after my first degree, where it was giving me something that I was not able to get from another source. That would be the ability to talk with people who enjoy the same things that I do at an intellectual level, and the ability to use the experiences to place them into the theory, or into the research, to say, "What is the practice of that?" and, "How does that come together?"

Rhoda's comment illustrates the power of Kruse and Louis' (1999) reflective dialogue, with the type of conversation that "permits the telling of new narratives and visions of a better school" (p. 11).

Other participants evaluated the model in terms of how it took care of teachers. Johnny was one teacher who expressed the importance of this. "If the teacher is healthy and happy, they're going to be healthy and happy in the classroom, and the kids are going to benefit." In terms of the sense of autonomy and professionalism associated with "taking care of teachers," one participant stated how professionals don't like to be forced into anything. "I believe professionals like to look at a situation and make a professional decision and go on." Further, one participant interpreted "helping teachers in their practice" as not taking away teachers' time in the classroom, illustrating Hargreaves' (1998) work on teachers' emotional bonds to their students. Hargreaves (1998) found that one important way in which teachers interpreted the educational changes that were imposed on them, as well as the ones they developed themselves, was in terms of the impact these changes had on their own emotional goals and relationship" (p. 574).

Teacher participants evaluated the professional learning community model based on how they perceived it as helping them in their practice. Those who knew more about the theory underpinning professional learning community models viewed this in terms of

enriching individual and collective learning capacity. Teachers with less knowledge about professional learning communities saw "helping teachers" as increasing autonomy, particularly in decision-making about professional development and practice, and in making things easier and more efficient. Such a difference in interpretation, especially when based on conceptual as well as practical knowledge about a model, leads me to ask how principals can best introduce and educate teachers about a new model. My research at Goldenview indicates that those who saw the most value in a professional learning community model were teachers who valued a joint individual and collective posture toward learning. I would argue that principals must address and promote the importance of this value if they wish to initiate and implement a professional learning community model. At the same time, they must also acknowledge the autonomy often desired by veteran teachers like Ron Adams in the opening vignette, and find creative ways to reconcile these two views. Kruse and Louis (1999) indicate the importance of this in their references to personal dignity, autonomy, and empowerment.

School's Purpose

In addition to how a professional learning community model assisted them in their practice, Goldenview participants also evaluated a professional learning community model on how the model fit with the school's overall purpose. This, in itself, was a subjective element reflecting individuals' beliefs and values. In relation to the school's purpose, a few participants expressed concern about the difficulty of balancing academic and citizenship goals, and evaluated a professional learning community model in terms of its response to this. Shirley shared her perspective on Goldenview's culture:

> I think we're producing excellent academic students, but I'm not sure that we're producing excellent citizens. And that's because, I don't think we work on that. We work on that outwardly. Our Core Virtue this month is courage, so we're struggling to think of who in our room can we write a little thing on. But have we really sat down as a group and talked about courage? We have not.

In terms of developing an "official" school purpose, Paul related the experience of having an outside expert lead the Goldenview staff in creating a school mission statement:

> For instance, the term "quality education" comes in the mission statement, and in our group, I absolutely refused to include that in our version, because I said it's a meaningless catch phrase that everybody uses. What does it mean? Sure, everybody wants a quality education, but what is it? That appears in the final statement. So, like I say, I don't think some of the concerns in our group were addressed.

This same struggle in defining learning and achievement is evident in the goals of professional learning community models. The Learning Commission's (2003) work highlights the importance of ongoing, data-driven decision-making regarding student achievement in a professional learning community, with terminology like "continuous improvement," and "shared accountability," emphasizing a competitive, business-like model. Kruse and Louis (1999), on the other hand, address student learning more broadly and emphasize the human element of professional learning communities by speaking of "reflection," "diversity," and "socially supportive" conditions. Based on my research, review of the literature, and personal experience, I would argue that to effectively implement a professional learning community model, teachers' sense of the model's purpose must fit coherently with their sense of the school's purpose. As Fullan (1996) states, "The ultimate test for reducing overload and fragmentation is whether teachers feel that greater coherence has been achieved" (p. 4).

Further to this sense of coherence, several participants did express a desire that a professional learning community model not be perceived as an additional thing, but that it be built into the framework of existing teacher practice.

From an administrator's perspective, Brent also addressed the importance of sustainability in a model:

> One of the reasons I chose not to use some of the language or jargon was that I had this fear that people will think it's a fad, and I don't want that. Because that's too often what fads do – they pick up all the language, you hear nothing but that for one, two, or three years, and then – POOF – it's gone. And I think there's a lot of strength in the PLC model, for sustainability, for building something that will last and make a real difference. I mean anyone can go in and do a flash-in-the-pan, who-hoo,

> don't we look great? For six months. It doesn't take much to do that. What takes hard work is to start something strong and build it, and have it sustain and carry on. I mean, it's my goal that when I leave the school, it should be like someone pulling their finger out of a puddle. Really. A couple of little ripples, but I want that school to be a better place when I leave it than when I came.

Goldenview participants reflected their value of having a professional learning community model be integrated with existing practice. Brent, as an administrator, also expressed the value of sustainability. I would argue that given the immediacy of teachers' work, it is not surprising that the majority of teacher participants were more concerned with evaluating a model based on how it could be integrated into existing practice, while the principal was especially concerned with the sustainability of the model. This also leads me to question the role of principal succession in implementation of new models, and how long a principal would have to remain at Goldenview to develop a sustainable professional learning community.

Model's Impetus

Along with evaluating a professional learning community model based on how it helps students and teachers and how it fits with the school's purpose, two veteran teachers expressed evaluation of such a model in terms of its impetus. They were interested in knowing whether the model was a political device and simply a "re-invention of the wheel." One veteran teacher expressed these sentiments:

> I get ticked off with the politics of education right now where we're re-inventing the wheel and a lot of us have been doing this since before time anyway, or they're thinking of things we did and putting another word for it. You know, collaboration. Most people have been collaborating forever.

Another teacher questioned whether a professional learning community model offered anything better than what was already being done in the classroom.

Based upon my study of Goldenview, I would suggest that veteran teachers, who have seen numerous educational fads come and go, may have a difficult time seeing the value in any new model. My research and personal experience lead me to believe that these teachers may take a "wait it out," position, knowing that either the new model or

the administrator will depart. In light of this, I would urge administrators to reflect deeply about the best way to introduce a new model to veteran teachers, some of whom may be skeptical of any kind of change.

Personality

Both newer and veteran teachers had questions about whether a professional learning community model suited the personality of all teachers, particularly in the level of collaboration and de-privatization required. Johnny shared his beliefs about personality being a key factor in teachers' willingness to work collaboratively. "I really believe that it has nothing to do with the system as much as personalities of staff members. And I think that's anywhere."

Nadine, a newer teacher, shared similar sentiments:

> I think you can put them [professional learning communities] in place no matter who's here, but as far as how quickly they'll move ahead may depend upon personality and people's willingness to get on board and go ahead with them as well.

Participant comments suggest that educators evaluate innovations like professional learning community models in terms of how the model's philosophy fits with their own belief and value system. Leithwood, Steinbach, and Janzi (2002) argue that personal goals and beliefs play an important role in educators' motivations to implement accountability policies. Although the administrators and teachers at Goldenview shared a common belief that a professional learning community model should ultimately benefit students by helping teachers in their work, there were differing opinions regarding what it meant to assist teachers. These opinions reflected personal values and beliefs about teaching.

Noting such variance in how participants defined "helping teachers" leads me to question how a professional learning community model can accommodate this diversity in belief and practice and serve to unite rather than to divide. Kruse and Louis' (1999) model attempts to address this diversity by allowing for some individuality in a school's mission and goals:

> While there is likely no one center that can capture the attention of every member of the school community, teachers and administrators can

> simultaneously consider a variety of closely linked complementary interests allowing individual members to participate in diverse ways (p. 11).

My study at Goldenview points to the importance of acknowledging varying interests, beliefs, and values, as participants evaluated the model in terms of its congruency with their own beliefs about education.

Leadership and Implementation

Goldenview participants also evaluated their professional learning community model on the principal's leadership and method of implementation.

Top-Down and Bottom-Up

Most teachers saw the need for some form of top-down leadership, particularly in initiating such a model; however, they also related the importance of teachers embracing a professional learning community model and willingly participating, as Rhoda expressed:

> I think the administrator is key but I think the administrator is key in the sense that he must adopt the philosophy of the original model, and that's a buy-in model and that's a model that says that each person as a professional contributes what they can to it…I would think that a superior principal would find ways to facilitate that, making it easier and easier for the teachers to buy in.

Rhoda's comment about the importance of leadership concurs with Kruse and Louis (1999), who state that, "Every study that has looked at professional community concludes that the role of school leaders is critical" (p. 11).

Relationships

Further to the role of principal leadership in evaluation of a professional learning community model, participants identified the relationship between principal and teachers during the implementation stage as a key factor. Teachers described the desired relationship within a professional learning community model in a variety of ways. One of these was how teachers were perceived to be valued in this model. Participants spoke of this in terms of teacher professionalism, teacher autonomy, and encouragement and

acknowledgement of all voices. Paul shared his belief that one of a leader's responsibilities "is to make sure that everybody's voice gets heard, everybody's concerns, viewpoints are addressed." Kruse and Louis (1999) speak to this by arguing that "principals must develop environments that are socially supportive of teachers' efforts" (p. 10), utilizing words like "trust" and "respect."

Susan took this one step further and expressed the challenge of creating an environment where professionalism and authentic relationships are balanced:

> It's the fine balance, the line, where you step over from being professional to being real. And I think a good professional learning community is some of both. It's balanced, and I'm not sure we're as balanced as we could be. We're a little lopsided.

Participants in my study emphasized the critical role that principal leadership played in their evaluation of the model. In implementation of a new school-wide model, teachers wanted a form of leadership that was responsive to the voices and needs of teachers. At the same time that leadership was desired to be responsive, several participants also mentioned the importance of the principal being the catalyst by introducing, educating about, and modeling the attributes of a professional learning community. These participant observations address the challenge of administrative leadership and the key role that principals play in school reform and change.

Starratt (2003) describes the type of leadership needed for this climate of change as requiring "deep convictions, strong commitments, and clear ideas about the directions for change in the form and content of schooling" (p. 23). He notes that it is not "for the faint-hearted or weekend enthusiast" (p. 25) As Rhoda summarized, "It takes someone with a real vision and the ability and willingness to carry it through, to get past those learning stages, because like most things, there's a learning curve."

Contextual Factors

Along with a model's philosophy and purpose and the manner of implementation, Goldenview participants also evaluated their professional learning community model according to its compatibility with contextual factors.

Practicality

The most immediate factor used by Goldenview teachers to evaluate their professional learning community model was its practicality. Goldenview teachers saw the current educational context as dominated by multiple and sometimes competing initiatives.

Some participants addressed this issue of multiple initiatives in their evaluation of the professional learning community model at Goldenview. They wanted to know if and how this model could be used to streamline goals, rather than the model being seen as "one-more-thing." Lana, the vice-principal, recognized this concern of teachers in stating that "there's a lot on teachers' plates and they're thinking, 'You know, don't start giving me any more to do.'" Participants questioned whether such a model could itself be embedded into school culture.

Participants saw this multiple-initiative context as compounded by a lack of time and resources. Several participants questioned how time, resources and training could be provided to fully implement a professional learning community model, given current fiscal constraints. As Lana stated:

> I wish that we could have enough resources to make learning more effective for everyone. I wish that we had enough textbook, laptops, and teaching assistants so that every student could learn and every teacher could teach. The frustrating thing about education right now is that we do not respond adequately to those who need more. We need the resources. That is *time* and *money* to do the job.

The principal, on the other hand, demonstrated a more optimistic perspective on this topic by asking whether a professional learning community model might be able to respond to external pressures to "do more with less." "Schools are under more and more pressure to do more with less and I think that the days when we can go in isolation are past. We need to rely on one another more and more." Brent saw professional learning communities as a way to ease pressures in a time of fiscal constraint.

Both Kruse and Louis' (1999) and the Learning Commission's (2003) professional learning community models address the issue of practicality. Recommendation #13 of the Learning Commission (2003) emphasizes development of a

supportive environment involving money, time, and resources. Kruse and Louis (1999) argue for the necessary structural conditions of time for teachers to meet, plan and talk, and physical proximity, involving creation of common work spaces. However, despite the way policy and theory emphasize supportive structural conditions, I would argue that it is not so easy to turn theory into practice, as I found in my study of Goldenview.

Teacher Workload

Participants expressed strong sentiments about an increasing teacher workload compounded by heightened accountability measures. Any evaluation of a new model would include the impact on teacher workload, both at the initial stages and after implementation, thus supporting Leithwood et al.'s (2002) framework of educators' judgments about new policies being based on the perceived consequences of the policy. Rhoda, who was very familiar with professional learning community models, observed that professional learning communities would create less work for teachers once they were implemented, but that it would take a two-year growth period to reach that point. "And I think that's the real burden, or the real barrier that we talked about before, is that it's something new. It takes training. It takes commitment and time."

The heightened sense of tension created by the labor dispute going on during my study amplified the contextual factors. Because the number of instructional minutes was a significant issue of contention for teachers at Goldenview, the professional learning community model was evaluated based on its impact upon teacher workload.

Local Context

In addition to the practicalities of time and money, the local context was also a factor in participants' evaluation of the professional learning community model at Goldenview. Goldenview's school culture presented a unique challenge in that the principal was attempting to build a school-wide professional learning community in a building that spanned ten grade levels. The history of the school, including factors related to its origin and frequent principal turnover, had affected the micropolitical dimension and thus influenced teachers' perceptions of new initiatives. One teacher who had been at Goldenview since its inception shared about the school's origin:

> I went through it. It was like a "divorce." Leaving behind people and coming here where there was no effort to build a team was hard. When we

> left the old school our choice was to stay and become Rockwood Junior High or come to the new school here. People came in cliques.

Brent expressed an awareness of this history, which continued to influence Goldenview culture. "And there are some strong personalities across the school. In a vacuum of strong leadership, at the school level, they have become powerful leaders." The practicality and rationale for building the type of school-wide community Brent sought to create was a question for several participants, most of whom had sought out their own professional learning community within or outside of the school.

Summary

While I divided findings and interpretations for this third research question into three themes, there was interplay amongst these themes. For example, the degree to which participants' philosophy of education agreed with the purpose of the professional learning community model points to the importance of the principal role in bringing together a wide spectrum of beliefs and opinions. As well, the principal role has the potential to deal with contextual factors and to address practicalities associated with implementation of a new model like professional learning community. Belchetz's (2005) study points to the role of principals as buffers, particularly in times of educational reform and strengthened external accountability, as was the case in her Ontario study:

> The deliberate actions of principals to channel accountability initiatives in meaningful and focused ways, to empower teachers by involving them in decision making and to respect them as professionals, was seen to be largely instrumental in raising teacher morale in the schools in the study. (p. 15)

Observations and participant comments emphasize the critical role of the principal in how Goldenview educators evaluated the professional learning community model. Brent had the challenge of being the "initiator," while at the same time providing for the structural and social conditions of the model necessary to encourage participation by all teachers. At the same time, teachers expected Brent, in implementation of such a model, to mediate the effects of the internal and external environments. Findings of my study point to the importance of the principal having a clear sense of vision concerning the inherent purpose of a professional learning community model. My observations at

Goldenview along with my own experience lead me to conclude that this understanding of purpose should assist the principal in addressing the structural and social conditions required for successful implementation of a professional learning community model.

Chapter Seven

Conclusions and the Ongoing Journey

The first half of this chapter presents an overview of the study, general conclusions, implications for practice, and recommendations for further research. In the second half, I present my ongoing journey as a researcher, examining literature that critiques contemporary educational reform and identifying further themes based on my reading, thinking, and research.

Overview

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate how educators' professional and personal identity is affected by participation in a school-wide professional learning community model. The specific objectives of the research were to collect, analyze and document (a) educators' understandings and expectations of a professional learning community model, both how it is initiated and implemented, (b) educators' perceptions of how their sense of identity is affected by participation in a professional learning community model, and (c) the manner in which educators evaluate models of professional learning community.

A significant amount of literature describes characteristics of professional learning communities and how they can effectively be implemented (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Kruse & Louis, 1999; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). However, there is little research on educators' perceptions about how participation in professional learning community models affects both professional and personal identity. This is important in light of the significant role educators play in school improvement and reform efforts (Daniel, Edge & Griffith, 2002; Fullan, 1996; Newman, 1996).

My study addressed educator's perceptions of a professional learning community model in a province where professional learning community models have been mandated for all schools. In addition, many of the Albertan schools which have implemented a professional learning community model have chosen a prescriptive approach (http://www.education.gov.ab.ca/k_12/special/aisi/ClearingHouse/report_cycle2/) which

may not account for the complexities associated with building a school-wide professional learning community (Achinstein, 2002).

Methodology

As my study aimed to document the perceptions of educators involved with a professional learning community, I used a qualitative case study as outlined by Stake (2000). This approach is informed by constructivist assumptions. The site selected was a K-9 public school in a combined suburban/rural school district, where a professional learning community model had been implemented for two years. The chief data source was in-depth individual interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2000).

I invited all staff members to participate in an initial focus group (Wellington, 2000), which enabled me to identify a purposive sample of participants for individual interviews. Seven teachers, a teacher/vice-principal, and a principal participated in two semi-structured individual interviews. I held a final focus group, attended by four of the eight teacher participants, following the second set of individual interviews. I used this opportunity to share results and encourage further discussion. Other data sources included observations of classrooms, hallways, and staff meetings, analysis of relevant government, school district, and school documents, and a researcher journal.

All individual and focus group interviews were transcribed. I provided each participant with a copy of the written text and gave opportunity to make deletions, changes, or additional comments.

I undertook data analysis during and after the data collection process. I analyzed the first individual interview transcripts in the development of the schedules for the second set of individual interviews. As well, I utilized responses from the first and second individual interviews to create an initial level of analysis to share and check for accuracy in the second focus group interview.

I subjected all data gathered to a content analysis in order to develop categories and themes for discussion related to the three research questions. I discussed emerging categories with my advisor, as well as with university and work colleagues.

Conclusions

Chapters 4 through 6 explored key findings and interpretations of this study as related to the three main research questions. The purpose of this section is not to restate

these findings and interpretations, but to offer several broad themes or conclusions that are more general in nature. These conclusions will focus on a response to the question of how teacher participation in a professional learning community model affects professional and personal identity.

"That Which Is"

In examining educators' perceptions of how their sense of identity is affected by participation in a professional learning community model, my study points to the importance of acknowledging existing beliefs and attitudes held by educators. Study participants held a wide range of understandings regarding the definition of a professional learning community model and how it should be implemented. The continuum of beliefs ranged from perceiving it as a re-invention of the wheel to seeing it as having the potential to develop both individual and organizational capacity.

Educators' viewpoints about a professional learning community model were influenced by their beliefs about teaching and learning, their sense of efficacy as a teacher, their satisfaction with the current state of education, and their vision about whether schools should and could be changed.

A variety of factors contributed to the unique perspective of each participant, factors which molded and shaped both professional and personal identity. Some of the factors that became evident during the study were background, past teaching experiences, and personality. While several participants suggested that it would be difficult to successfully implement a professional learning community model at Goldenview until more veteran teachers were replaced by newer teachers, others noted that desire to build a school-wide professional community depended primarily on personality, not upon level of experience. By way of example, two of the participants who were enthusiastic about the professional learning community model were veteran teachers.

What did become clear during the course of the study was that those participants who had greater conceptual and practical understanding of professional learning community models could more easily see the possibilities for a such a model to benefit teachers' sense of professional and personal identity. Most of these same participants had already experienced some benefits while working in a professional learning community, often with teachers who were outside of Goldenview School. In the absence of consistent

principal leadership due to frequent turn-over (five principals within nine years), Goldenview teachers had become adept at finding their own professional networks and communities to meet their individual needs.

Based on my observations at Goldenview, along with my own lived experience, I conclude that administrators seeking to implement a professional learning community model should first seek to acknowledge and understand the existing school culture and the unique mix of voices that create this multi-faceted culture.

Teachers like Ron Adams, from the opening vignette in Chapter 1, are a part of this culture. Their career has been one of "create and protect," which, as Lieberman and Miller (1990) argue, results in some strong and well-defended walls.

"That Which Could Be"

While participant comments and observations reflected the importance of acknowledging existing teacher perceptions, the Goldenview study also suggested significance of "that which could be." In particular, those more familiar with the concept of professional learning communities identified the importance of the principal casting the vision for staff by providing leadership, direction, enthusiasm, and modeling. While participants hesitated to use the word "top-down" in regard to implementation, there was a general consensus that the principal was the most critical factor in initiation of a model that involves cultural change.

Participants also emphasized that teacher identity could be positively impacted by introducing a model that had the characteristics of embeddedness and long-term sustainability. Embeddedness defined as something you "are," rather than something you "do," came through in my research as having the potential to positively affect teacher identity by touching core beliefs and values.

Goldenview teachers also considered the role of the principal in developing trust as an important factor. Rhoda, a veteran teacher in the study, emphasized that if a professional learning community model depends upon shared beliefs and values, then the school culture must reflect a community where all voices are encouraged to speak.

My study suggests and points to the challenge for a principal to initiate and then implement a professional learning community model that includes all teachers. In creating a vision of the future, "that which could be," Brent, the principal, also had to

contend with the present, "that which is." As reported in Chapter 5 about the effect of participation in a professional learning community model on professional and personal identity, what some teachers perceived as a benefit, others saw as a challenge. There were concerns about vulnerability and loss of power and influence mixed with dreams about synergetic learning and authentic relationships.

My study at Goldenview leads me to question whether, and how, a principal can mediate the effects of teachers' background, experience, and personality, all of which contribute toward the micropolitical context of a school culture. Fullan (2001) argues that both individual and collective identity must be addressed simultaneously in educational change, but when dealing with a psychological state created by a combination of personality and experience, I would argue that the process is a complex one. Perhaps the question that should be asked is how a principal can use the strength of diversity amongst staff to build a stronger school-wide community. What about Ron Adams from the opening vignette? How might Ron's principal engage his strengths to draw him into community, and even learn from Ron, rather than establishing the parameters that keep Ron on the outside?

"That Which Complicates"

As well as the complex interplay between a principal's implementation of a model and the impact upon teachers' perceptions of benefits and challenges to their identity, my study at Goldenview pointed to other "complicating" factors that were, at least to some degree, beyond the control of both principal and teachers. Lack of time, money, and resources had a strong impact upon teachers' sense of identity as professionals and their willingness to embrace a new model. Several teachers spoke about the current lack of societal appreciation for their role as professionals, and for some, speaking about this subject brought an intense display of emotion. This feeling was intensified through the labour dispute that occurred during my study. Thus, it was no surprise that a number of participants, particularly those with less knowledge of professional learning communities, evaluated such the model based on its pragmatic benefits and whether it would make their lives easier as teachers at Goldenview.

This "complicating" factor has implications for principals who promote a professional learning community model based on the communitarian premise that people

are meant to be interdependent and live in community. My study illustrated that when external factors create a different hierarchy of values, not always theoretically based, it may be difficult, as in the Goldenview culture, to implement a professional learning community model with values that are not congruent to those of the participants. Morgan's (1998) metaphor of organizations as organisms highlights the importance of organizations being "open to their environment" and achieving "an appropriate relation with that environment if they are to survive" (p. 41). Therein lays the challenge for school principals – to keep the internal and external forces in some state of equilibrium.

The structure of a K-9 school, which spanned ten grade levels, was another factor that increased the complexity of implementing a school-wide professional learning community model at Goldenview. Differences in values and beliefs were especially apparent between the junior high and elementary divisions. The origin of the school thirteen years ago, with the creation of two K-9 schools from one elementary and one junior high school contributed to this culture. Pre-existing collegial relationships from before the school's beginning influenced Goldenview's present micropolitical context. My study highlighted the difficulty of "restructuring" when existing patterns of relationship are strongly entrenched.

My observation of Goldenview leads me to conclude that it is difficult, but vital, for principals to acknowledge and provide a way to mediate these internal and external constraints, especially in an effort to build trust with teachers. Kruse and Louis' (1999) emphasis on the importance of principal leaders addressing both structural and social conditions in implementation of a professional learning community model is crucial. In contrast, the definition of a professional learning community utilized by the Learning Commission (2003) speaks of a supportive environment only in terms of "adequate resources and policies." I would contend that this type of policy statement does not appear defined by a well-rounded research perspective.

Research and my own experience lead me to conclude that there must be an acknowledgement of "that which is" before the "that which could be" is instituted. Morgan's (1998) concept of metaphors as central to the way organizational life is read, understood, and shaped emphasizes the importance of new ways of seeing. My research at Goldenview is supported by Morgan's theory on the importance of leaders seeing and

understanding the complexity of their organizations, as well as his caution that leaders are not only "readers" but "authors" as well (p. 321). Perhaps this statement should be edited to read "co-authors," instead of "authors," if the desire is for the full participation of all teachers in educational reform and change.

Implications for Practice

The following implications for practice developed from my review of the literature, my case study of Goldenview School, and my lived experience as an administrator and teacher. They are offered for consideration by school administrators, school jurisdictions, and policy makers.

Observations and participant comments, along with the literature, clearly point to the important role of the principal in developing and implementing a professional learning community model. This being the case, it is crucial that administrators have an expanded theoretical understanding of professional learning community models and their complexities. The challenging context of Goldenview, with a revolving principal door and an origin that failed to create a strong whole-school identity, highlights the importance of administrators understanding the connection between theory and practice when implementing a new model. While principals are often given a "one-size-fits-all" model to implement, the Goldenview study suggests that there are many other factors that should be considered in implementing a model promoting communitarian values, a model that encourages connections and collaboration but sometimes fails to take into account existing patterns of relationships. Principals, school jurisdictions, and policy makers need to acknowledge that school cultures are complex and that prescriptive approaches will not necessarily lead to desirable change and improvement.

As well, my study of Goldenview points to the importance of addressing structural and social conditions when implementing a professional learning community model. In the current context of fiscal constraint, time and money are at a premium. Adequate resources and recognition of teachers' additional workload must be considered. In particular, school principals should consider the distribution of resources when implementing a professional learning community model, in an effort not to alienate teachers. Likewise, school jurisdictions and policy makers need to acknowledge that educational reform and change require both time and money to implement.

Providing the necessary social conditions to create a climate of trust and respect may prove to be a more difficult task. In a culture of accountability, principals are often placed in the position of managers who pass down policy directives from school boards. My case study at Goldenview emphasizes that principals must model participation, reflection, listening, and learning as they strive to create community as more than just a way of "doing," but a way of "being" as well. Principals must become active participants in building community; it is not sufficient to manage the process.

Observations and participant comments related to the benefits and limitations of participation in a professional learning community model highlighted the diverse beliefs and values of Goldenview staff; participants expressed a wide range of feelings about establishing a school-wide learning community. An expanded theoretical understanding of the complexity of community and how it affects individuals will aid school jurisdictions and principals in development of practices to address these issues. Implications for professional development are that principals may need assistance developing competencies in the areas of reaching consensus, resolving conflict, and in ensuring all teacher voices are heard.

Recommendations for Further Research

Goldenview School, the site of my case study, was still in the early stages of implementing a professional learning community model. Future studies of schools further into the implementation process could lead to deeper understanding of some of the factors related to teachers' perceptions of a professional learning community model and how participation in such a model affects professional and personal identity.

As well, studies that examine how school principals support and encourage teacher diversity within a professional learning community model are recommended.

Finally, the Goldenview study suggests the need for an expanded understanding of how a communitarian-based model like a professional learning community is being utilized as a school improvement tool, and how this affects students, teachers, and administrators. Questions remain about the productivity of looking for linear relationships between a sense of community and educational outcomes.

The Journey Continues

After the data collection stage was complete, I put my research aside and focused on the coursework for my M.Ed. degree. For several months I became immersed in learning about current educational issues, and in particular, the effects of neo-liberal ideas on educational reforms. The discourse of market-based reforms like accountability, new managerialism, and school choice, and their effect on practice within schools captured my attention. I began to think about the interplay of these reforms with the whole notion of professional learning communities, and how teachers' identity fit into this framework.

At the same time that I was reflecting on the macropolitical realm's intersection with professional learning community models, I returned to think about Mitchell and Sackney's (2000) capacities, with the question of how extensively both macropolitical and micropolitical issues had been addressed in such models. Because the purposes of schooling and the practices of teachers are often challenged, both inside and outside of schools, schools are arenas of struggle (Achinstein, 2002). Blase (1998) contends that "change dynamics – ambiguity, uncertainty, and goal complexity – provoke and exacerbate such intensified [micropolitical] interaction" (p. 547), both in the formal and informal arenas of a school's life.

My interview data had raised some interesting questions about the role of "power" and its influence, and I began to wonder if professional learning community models, particularly the types of models being implemented in many of Alberta's schools, addressed these kinds of cultural politics.

Beyond the power relationships found in micropolitical interactions, I also began to look at the operation of Foucault's (1975/1977) "disciplinary power" and how it gives rise to a new kind of bureaucracy where power is wielded through "normalization" (Quicke, 2000). I became interested in discovering how teachers perceived professional learning community models in an era of accountability measures.

From my own experience and research, I saw teachers being asked to become reflective practitioners, yet their knowledge development was expected to take place within the "norms" of the organization. I also observed how approaches to school reform emphasized the development of democratic processes such as empowerment and collaboration as vehicles for school improvement, rather than as an ends in themselves

(Blase, 1998). I looked back upon my administrative tenure and asked myself what my real motivation had been for various aspects of the professional learning community model that I had implemented. For a more complete understanding of professional learning community models, I realized the necessity of stepping back to examine the particular social, political, economic, and historical context that gave birth to this notion, and the ongoing interaction that continues to shape its development.

My journey began with professional learning community models, and the realization that yes, there is more than one model! I moved from a comparison of Mitchell and Sackney's (2000) model to the one with which I was familiar from my own practice, this leading to an interest in the little-researched area of teacher identity within such a model. I focused on the voice of educators sharing how such a model affected them personally and professionally. Now I have moved outside the model to an enlarged view of how the notion of professional learning communities developed from within a particular context, and how this context both influences and is perceived by educators.

I did not set out in my research to examine the macropolitical arena and its intersection with professional learning community models. However, throughout the course of my research I became increasingly aware of the interplay between external factors and teachers' understanding of and response to a professional learning community model. The next section of this chapter presents findings from my research that highlight how teachers at Goldenview perceived their current context and how this in turn influenced their understanding of and response to such a model. Within the context of these findings and interpretations, I introduce literature that critiques contemporary educational reform.

Current Context

The main themes in this section include lack of time and its connection to tightened accountability systems, lack of money and resources, and a loss of teacher autonomy due to increased external accountability measures.

Teacher Overload

Teachers at Goldenview were feeling the pressures of their jobs in terms of too little time and too much to do. More than that, they felt that much of what they had to do

was not productive work related to student learning. Wanda, a younger teacher, expressed her concerns in this way:

> I'd have to be honest that the frustration is, and even I hear from veteran teachers that they say they do more work now than they did 15 years ago, but it's not productive work. Or work that really enhances child learning. It's a lot more paper work. Like technology, the stuff that's taking up a lot of our time right now with different programs and those kind of things. So, those kind of things I find frustrating, especially when you hear from teachers like, "Whoa, this is so much! I can't even imagine what it's going to be like for you in twenty years!" you know.

Susan linked these pressures to globalization and the resultant effect of increasingly stringent accountability measures in schools:

> I think that's changed. I think that parents in our community want the academics…And our country, the government, wants the academics because we, in a sense, are competing with the world. We must keep up with Japan and some of the other Asian countries. But when all is said and done, except for the engineer who has to put a picture together on how to build a bridge, or the astronaut who has to put a formula together on how to get a spaceship off, for the majority, did the highest mark in math in grade 10 or grade 8 or grade 3 or grade 12 really matter? But how that person performs as a citizen in the community, in their community, that will carry them for life.

Although the students at Goldenview were doing well academically, several teachers stressed that there was more to student achievement than numerical results. Mike spoke of his concerns about provincial achievement tests (PATs):

> Now we're more pressed for time. There's more pressure because of PAT's. PAT's are good to a point. Administration will come in if there are poor results and that doesn't seem all that beneficial. If homes are selling easily in Goldenview because of PATs – and they actually advertise this on radio – that's not a feather in my cap!

Teachers at Goldenview were concerned about their changing roles in an era where top importance was placed on academic accountability, especially when their own values as teachers did not coincide with what was valued by society at large. Bottery (2004) contends that education must be as rich and diverse as the society it attempts to nurture. However, he sees that economic productivity has emerged as the dominant objective, thus narrowing the focus of schools and ultimately affecting the role of teachers in classrooms. When teachers, such as those who participated in the Goldenview study, entered the profession with a vision for influencing the lives of children, and then were forced into an agenda not chosen by themselves, there emerged a sense of frustration.

Money and Resources

Lack of money and resources was another factor affecting teacher efficacy. Susan attributed lack of financial resources, at least in part, to site-based management. This in turn was connected to her own sense of efficacy as a professional:

> Things have changed in a huge, huge, huge way. I went into it thinking that I would have such a personal influence and I could personally, alone, individually, make a difference in children. And, over the years, I've learned that – I don't know if I have learned – I'm feeling that that's not happening any more. I think it's not happening for many, many, many reasons. I think one of the reasons is again, time and money. I think since site-based management has come into all schools, pretty much everywhere now, I think that has had a huge, huge impact on my career.

This lack of money and resources was compounded in teachers' eyes by the increasing needs of children in today's society. Susan commented on how children had changed during the span of her career and how she had come to the realization "that some of them come with issues that I'm not going to be effective in helping to change."

Loss of Control

Teachers at Goldenview were experiencing the summative effect of teacher overload and a lack of resources. Participants perceived this as a loss of professional autonomy to external sources. A veteran teacher expressed how it felt to work in such an environment. "I think we've now got such a hierarchy within the system that every step,

everything you do, someone is calling you on it, I guess." This person defined the system as "the hierarchy of colleagues and government and the people that dictate to me the realm of what I can do."

Another teacher related how staff members at Goldenview are asked for input concerning school and district decisions, but that:

> A lot of times the decision is directed by outside forces. So even no matter when we agree or disagree, we go along with it because someone else has told us that that is the way it will be… Yes. There's a lot of forces. Sometimes it's parents, sometimes the school board decision, sometimes Alberta Learning, sometimes it's the principal and their goal, or the administration and their goal. But it appears to some members on the staff that it's already decided before you ask, so why ask?

Evident in these comments is the current tension between reforms around school de-centralization and de-regulation and a new type of centralization and re-regulation founded on the notion of "community" (Ball, 2003; Bottery, 2005). Bottery (2005) describes the heightened sense of paradox and tension as global realities dictate "decentralization, flexibility and empowerment on the one hand, and centralization and control on the other. The feelings are then likely to be paradoxical ones of perceived increases in both the fragmentation and the control of work" (p. 54). Responses from study participants at Goldenview reflected similar feelings.

Anderson (1999) also questions the goals for participatory reforms, such as professional learning community models, stating some organizational theorists' opinion that "participatory goals and practices are often used merely to legitimate the organization and are not intended to be fully implemented" (p. 192). Such seemed to be case in the Goldenview staff member's feelings about input into decision-making as expressed above.

Quicke's (2000) critique of collaborative reforms is even stronger:

> "New times" have given rise to a new language of oppression, one that is heavily disguised in the vocabulary of legitimate community and democratic practice; beneath rhetoric, old structures of inequality and oppression have remained and continue to be influential. (p. 301)

Participants were not united in their opinion as to how they evaluated a professional learning community model within such a context. One veteran teacher strongly expressed how this model reflected yet another meaningless attempt to change the face of education:

> Provincial funding, the person next door, everyone's an expert because they've all gone through the system, a lot of blanket statements. Or someone gets a brainwave and makes a buck. It starts in the States but five years later it ends up in Alberta. The wheel is still around. Stuff comes from the superintendent and it's re-train, re-train. But the classroom hasn't changed! We've lost the focus of what it's all about.

This loss of control was also expressed by teachers as a lack of recognition for their value as professionals. One participant expressed it in terms of how every once in a while, teachers do need "a pat on the back," and how the entire focus seems to be on kids, rather than taking care of the teachers. "If you take care of the teachers, everything will work out."

In reflecting on whether the labour dispute affected the results of the study, one participant commented:

> I think they would be the same but I think it's very important that overlaying it is the sense that they're not valued – that the school board is saying, "You know, we'll make you work and work and work, but we won't give anything back in return. And we don't even want to talk to you." So there's a sense of de-professionalizing and that going on and I think it's extremely important. Because where that hope and sense of optimism, we're coming from and that sense of community we're building, and not it's saying, "We want you to build the community, but we don't value you." So again, that sense of why should I jump on the bandwagon is there. So it's another roadblock that's been imposed. Now this is a particularly strong year, yes, because we went to the point of lock-out. And when you get that critical action, you change attitudes. And I've seen that again in the initiators saying, "Well, maybe I need to take a step back."

One teacher with knowledge of professional learning community models saw the inherent difficulty of "mandating" such a model and providing Goldenview staff with the time necessary to build this kind of learning community:

> If you mandate it, then it's probably going to fall, particularly in this staff because they will resist those mandates. If you allow time for it, the first thing I believe that the staff will do is take personal time to do those personal goals, and when they're caught up on those a bit, then they will start to work on these. And I don't see that happening, simply because of budgets. Perhaps when we settle our new contract, I would say that we will see cuts again, because there's only a finite number of dollars and the school board will be imposed by Alberta Learning by this budget which will say, "Okay, you pay teachers more and you get rid of some teachers."

Goldenview teachers, particularly the veteran ones, expressed strong feelings of work overload, compounded by a lack of resources and a loss of control. Teachers viewed external sources as determining what was valuable, rather than teachers themselves having a voice. Most participants, despite their views on professional learning community models, perceived the difficulty of mandating a communitarian model in such an educational climate.

Teacher Response

Participants saw forces out of the locus of teacher control as dictating many aspects of teacher practice. Professional learning communities, as a provincial mandate, fell into this same category. How then did teachers personally respond to such external measures? Out of my research arose three main patterns of survival among Goldenview teachers, particularly among those who had taught for a number of years: surrender, resistance, and hope. Most of the participants did not fall into one distinct category, instead exemplifying different responses to different external pressures or in different situations.

Surrender

> One participant found that survival within the system involved surrender:
> I've become quite distraught. I think at times I've become negative and...being, "Why bother giving the extra?" I get tired of fighting the

> system. And after I've fought the system long enough, you just kind of give up.

This teacher also shared about the loneliness of surrender and how it would be difficult to bring up the subject of Provincial Achievement Tests and their merit with other staff members.

Ball (2003) describes the personal and psychological costs faced by individual teachers when judgment and authenticity are sacrificed for impression and performance:

> Increasingly, the day-to-day practice is flooded with a baffling array of figures, indicators, comparisons and forms of competition. Within all this, the contentments of stability are increasingly elusive, purposes are made contradictory, motivations become blurred and self worth is uncertain. We are unsure what aspects of work are valued and how to prioritize efforts. We become uncertain about the reasons for actions…These things become matters of self-doubt and personal anxiety rather than public debate. (p. 220)

Resistance

Resistance was another pattern of teacher response to external mandates. One teacher questioned the value of staff development activities related to the professional learning community model:

> Again, I don't get too hung up on the politics, except sometimes the politics drive me crazy, when you're sitting there. How does it help me personally as a teacher, to sit down there with 25 other teachers and develop a mission statement? To me, it's irrelevant…And I think a lot of it is just political. You're an administrator and you need to have a mission statement and all these goals and etc., etc., and they want us to input, and really, I couldn't care less. And I think the average teacher couldn't care less because it doesn't change. But they use it against you sometimes.

Resistance at Goldenview appeared more underground than overt, occurring both at the individual and group level. Several participants spoke about how at one division level, individuals had banded together to form a power group, thus activating the micropolitical dimension. However, in many cases resistance was defined in terms of

individuals giving outward acquiescence for a new directive, but then closing their classroom door and not embracing the new practice. Such action seemed to indicate an unwillingness to sacrifice personal beliefs and values for what was deemed to be valuable by some external power source, whether that was the principal, the school district, or Alberta Education.

Hope

Despite some of these more negative or cynical feelings surrounding perceived external pressures, several teachers were still resilient in their hope that as professionals, they were making a difference. What carried them through the hard times was their commitment to their work, and their chance to build into the lives of their students, thus substantiating Hargreaves' (2003) claims about the importance of emotional aspects to teachers' work. Said one teacher, "I don't like the politics, but I still enjoy the classroom." This teacher disliked the number of PD days and other related activities because of the time it took away from the classroom.

Even an individual who was prone to "surrender" expressed elements of this "hope":

> I guess I'm the kind of person where I haven't got to whatever my point of "I can't do it" is. I'm still getting up. I'm still wanting to come. In the mornings, I still want to come, and when I get here and I sit down with a young student who is having trouble answering questions, and I can sit with them, and show them where they can find the answers, talk to them, and work through the problem-solving…Yes, that says I haven't quite "burned" yet and I can do this again tomorrow. And I liked doing that yesterday. I think that's what is still bringing me back.

Both the principal and vice-principal were very hopeful individuals who strongly believed in the merit of a professional learning community. Brent expressed a belief that "it's all about ideas bigger than myself and things more important than myself. And the idea of being a 'principled' person and the principles are what carry you through, in spite of the storms of life that come in." He modeled this belief for his staff and desired that all teachers would live by the same standard. The communitarian foundation of the professional learning community model fit well with his own style of leadership. Yet,

Brent was faced with a context where teachers felt overworked and de-valued due to macropolitical elements. In addition, micropolitical factors had created an uneven playing field where some teachers felt they had no voice. Arguably, Brent's dilemma is probably all too common in educational institutions of today.

Conclusion

A professional learning community model with its shared values and collaborative practices promises a way to help teachers deal with increasing accountability measures. Yet, as I read the literature and conducted my research, I began to question the premise of a school-wide professional learning community model and its implications for teacher practice. Ball (2003) succinctly reflects the appeal of recent educational reforms aimed at improving student academic performance. "The novelty of this epidemic of reform is that it does not simply change what people, as educators, scholars and researchers do, it changes who they are" (p. 215). Therein are both the pitfalls and the promises.

A mandated professional learning community model clearly has potential to lead to a culture of performativity where external sources, rather than the teacher as professional, determine what is deemed valuable (Ball, 2003). In cases where there is a discrepancy in values between the teacher and external sources, such performativity has personal and psychological costs, leading to feelings of inauthenticity as expressed by several Goldenview participants. Ball (2003) describes the impact performativity can have on a teacher's social identity and characterizes it as "the struggle over the teacher's soul" (p. 217).

Quicke (2000) adds Foucault's (1975/1977) dimension of disciplinary power to this relationship. "In the same way as it does with the child, the school constructs teacher identities, giving them certain kinds of selves which can be readily managed by the school and then proceeds to minister to the selves it has constructed" (Quicke, 2000, p. 309). Quicke argues that collaborative approaches like professional learning community models can actually be used to increase control over educators; on one hand, teachers are encouraged to be self-managing, while on the other, the parameters of their knowledge are set by external forces.

Similarly, Fenwick (1998) questions the discourse of learning organizations as they present "a romantic ideal encouraging workers' personal growth and imaginative

engagement" yet continue "the workplace tradition of dictating which kind of growth counts most, what imaginative endeavours are most valued, what kinds of talk, relationships and identities are allowed and which are out of bounds or even meaningless" (p. 152). Fenwick notes that the goal of community, commitment and co-operation may instead be replaced by cynicism, confusion and alienation. Such seemed to be the case for some of Goldenview's veteran teachers, who clearly sensed a loss of professional autonomy.

Yet, while critical theorists like Ball, Bottery, and Quicke are quick to point out the inherent dangers of professional learning community models, these same theorists also recognize the promise of such a model. Bottery (2004) addresses learning community as "a phrase of the moment" (p. 179), because of the ease with which it can be adapted to so many different agendas. "It is therefore very important to know what the term is being filled up with – and by whom" (p. 180).

Quicke (2000) argues that the goal of developing cultures that are better for learning – being authentic and genuinely collaborative – has potential to lead to better schooling. He supports a new type of professionalism where individuals have the capacity for reflexivity of both themselves and their institutional context, thus allowing captured individuals within collaborative cultures to remain agents as well.

It would seem that in a true "learning" community, teachers would be allowed to critique and question, even if it would rock the foundation of the learning community. It would seem that in a "professional" learning community, the judgment of teachers would be highly regarded and there would be a flexibility and fluidity in the structure of the learning community as needs were assessed, goals set, and action taken. It would seem that in a professional learning "community," diversity would be welcomed and all voices would be encouraged to speak.

Quicke's (2000) question is important to ask within the Alberta context, where professional learning communities have been mandated by the government and are supported and encouraged by the Alberta Teachers' Association – "Is it possible for professionals to think and act in an open and creative way in institutions in which language of collaboration is pervasive, but where reality is often rather different?" (p. 314).

It seems imperative that we restore balance back to the notion of professional learning community models, that we restore the communitarian principles that theorists like Sergiovanni (1994) envisioned in the life of schools. In many schools and school jurisdictions, it is apparent that professional learning community models have been adopted simply as a quick and easy route to improved student results. Yes, it seems clear from the research that teachers working collaboratively will have some positive impact on student achievement. But if on the way we sacrifice the values of open inquiry and professional judgment among teachers, along with a climate of dignity and respect, what will we have modeled to our students, the leaders of tomorrow?

External accountability measures show no signs of dissipating. If this is the case, the challenge for schools like Goldenview is to become learning communities that are able to handle these measures without compromising themselves and the multi-faceted purposes of education. Schools and school administrators face the responsibility of creating, implementing, and sustaining professional learning community models that will promote a culture of both "doing" and "being."

My own role as an administrator takes me back to the voice of Ron Adams from the opening vignette of Chapter 1. Through my research, I hoped to understand the theoretical and practical implications of professional learning community models, particularly from teachers' perspectives. My time at Goldenview took me to the story behind the voice, to understand the deep-seated implications of a model that, on the surface, seems to be a straightforward and efficient way to improve student achievement.

At the outset of my research, I believed that variation in teacher response to professional learning community models could be attributed to manner of implementation, school culture, and teacher personality. My study at Goldenview reinforced for me that all of these factors do play a role in teacher response to such a model. In addition, I became increasingly aware of the macropolitical context and the potential for professional learning community models to be utilized as accountability tools.

In light of this, the concerns of teachers like Ron Adams become more complicated as the micropolitical factors of school context and teacher personality interplay with the macropolitical factors. As a school administrator, I more clearly see the

necessity of balancing the managerial role handed to me by my school district with the role of building an authentic community that seeks to acknowledge and include all teachers. Some days, I wonder if it is possible to do both of these things simultaneously. The managerial role is much clearer, while the role of building community is messier and fraught with all the complications of being "human."

Perhaps it is idealistic to believe that a professional learning community can be both a way of doing and a way of being, but my research at Goldenview has reinforced my desire to be an administrator committed to such an endeavour.

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Appendix A
Letter of Information - Teacher

September 17, 2004

Dear teacher colleague,

My name is Carolyn Gartke and I am a master's student in Educational Administration and Leadership in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta. The purpose of this letter is to invite you to become involved in a research study titled **Educators' perceptions of a professional learning community model**. Your school division and principal have given written permission for me to conduct this study in your school. The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of educators' perceptions of how personal and professional identity is affected through participation in a professional learning community model. It is my hope that the findings from this study will assist policy makers and educators in creating the best possible learning environments for both students and teachers. This study will take place over the next year and is done to fulfill the thesis requirements for my Master's of Education degree.

I will be conducting both **focus group and individual interviews** with the school principal, and a minimum of nine teachers. All teachers will receive an invitation to participate in the **first focus group interview to be held on October 8, 2004**; subsequent to that interview, a minimum of nine teachers will be selected through a purposeful random sampling strategy to ensure that there is accurate representation of gender, teaching experience, grade levels, and subject areas. **Informed and written consent** will be obtained from all subjects before the interviews begin. **The ten participants (one principal and nine teachers) will be invited to become involved in two focus group interviews and two individual interviews, with each of the four interviews lasting from 30-40 minutes**. The first focus group interview will take place before the first individual interview, and the second focus group interview will take place following the second individual interview. I will be asking participants for permission to take notes during the focus group interviews and to tape-record the individual interviews. In all cases, a **type-written copy of the focus group and tape-recorded individual interviews** will be prepared and given to participants. They will be asked to make **addition and deletions (as necessary) to ensure the accuracy** of these transcriptions before the information is analyzed as data. **The four interview schedules have been appended to this letter of information.**

Given the nature of the study, I do not anticipate that there will be any risk to the participants. Before providing written consent, however, the participants will be told of their right to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty, and all information that they have provided will be removed from my data bank and destroyed. I will repeat this before the first focus group interview begins. At the time, the ten participants will also be informed that **pseudonyms** will be used with the **aim of maintaining privacy**

and confidentiality. They will also be informed that to maintain confidentiality, when I write the thesis document, **I will not use quotations that might identify individuals**. While the study is being conducted, all notes and tape-recording will be kept secured at my home. Only my supervisor and I will have access. All notes, tape-recorded interviews, and transcriptions will be kept secured and then destroyed after five years. I anticipate completing this study and the reporting no later than **December 2005.**

Participants will be provided with **feedback on the progress of the research during the second focus group interview.** They will also be informed at the outset that **they can request and receive a copy of the final written report** some time after December 2005. A copy of the final written report will be sent to the school jurisdiction. The results of this research may also be used for publication and conference presentations.

If you are willing to accept this invitation and would like to participate in this study, I would ask that you **please read and sign the attached Consent Form**. You may **return it personally** to me today, **fax it to the university (Attn: Dr. Rosemary Foster)**, or **bring it with you to the focus group interview on October 8, 2004**.

Should you have any questions or require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me at: Carolyn Gartke (780-960-2575); email: cgartke@ualberta.ca)

Sincerely,

Carolyn Gartke
Educational Policy Studies
Faculty of Education
University of Alberta
Edmonton, AB T6G 2G2

Appendix B
Written Consent Form - Teacher

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation of your school jurisdiction in the research project and agree. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and/or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Principal Researcher: Carolyn Gartke (780-960-2575)
Research Supervisor: Dr. Rosemary Foster (780-492-0760)

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculties of Education and Extension Research Ethics Board (EE REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EE REB at (780) 492-3751. A copy of this consent form will be given to you to keep for your records and reference.

School Name: _____

Teacher's Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Researcher's Signature:_____ **Date:** _____

Appendix C
First Focus Group Interview Schedule

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study of *Educators' perceptions of a professional learning community model*. I am interested in learning more about how teachers' participation in your school learning community affects their identities. The questions I will ask you during this and subsequent interviews have been designed with that purpose in mind. I would like to remind you that your participation is voluntary and that you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty; you are not obligated to answer any of the questions. When I write my thesis and articles for publication or conference presentations, I will use pseudonyms and will not use any quotations that might identify you. I promise that everything you say will be held in confidence. Today, Dr. Rosemary Foster, my thesis supervisor, will be taking notes from our conversation. I will type those up and get them back to you for your review and approval before I use them as data. Only Dr. Foster and I will have access to the data, and following the ethical standards of the University of Alberta, these data will be kept secured at my home for five years and then destroyed. Do you have any questions before we begin?

The 30 minute interview will be guided by the following questions and probes:

General Information about the School Community.

- Tell me about the make-up of the student population.
- Tell me about the make-up of the staff.
- What are the strengths of the school?
- What are the challenges?

Professional Learning Community Models.

Recommendation #13 from the report of Alberta's Commission on Learning (October 2003) requires that "every school operate as a professional learning community dedicated to continuous improvement in students' achievement." Many schools in Alberta are seeking to implement professional learning community models where teachers and administrators work jointly to share in learning and then act upon what they have learned, with the goal of high achievement and continuous improvement for all students.

- What is your understanding of the benefits of a professional learning community model?

- What kinds of limitations do you see apparent in such a model?

Appendix D
First Individual Interview Schedule

Background Information.

- How long have you been at this school?
- How did you come to be at this school?
- Previous educational and work experience?
- Why did you choose to be a teacher?

General Information about the School Community (anything to add from focus group discussion?)

- Tell me about the make-up of the student population.
- Tell me about the make-up of the staff.
- What are the strengths of the school?
- What are the issues and challenges facing you and the school?

Professional Learning Community Models.

Recommendation #13 from the report of Alberta's Commission on Learning (October 2003) requires that every school operate as a professional learning community dedicated to continuous improvement in students' achievement." Many schools in Alberta are seeking to implement professional learning community models where teachers and administrators work jointly to share in learning and then act upon what they have learned, with the goal of high achievement and continuous improvement for all students.

Professional learning communities are environments characterized by such things as collaboration, de-privatization of teaching practice and shared norms and values.

- How do you define the term "professional learning community"?
- How does a professional learning community develop?
- What is your understanding of the benefits of a professional learning community model?
- What kinds of limitations do you see apparent in such a model?

Impact on Professional Identity.

- How does a PLC model affect teachers as professionals? (Do you see teachers' participation in a PLC as having an impact on their role in the classroom?) Can you give some specific examples?
- Benefits? Challenges / Limitations?

Impact on Personal Identity.

- How does participation in a model affect teachers as individuals? Personal benefits? Limitations? Examples?

Taking It Further.

- What more would you like to know about PLC models which would assist your work as a teacher?

Appendix E
Second Individual Interview Schedule

The second individual interview will be tape-recorded and will be semi-structured. This second interview will take around 30 minutes.

I will read this paragraph before beginning the second interview:
Thank you once again for agreeing to participate in my study of *Educators' perceptions of a professional learning community model*. I am going to share with you what I have learned regarding perceptions about the professional learning community model in your school. I would ask that you let me know what I have missed. Please feel free to ask any questions that you may have. I would like to remind you that you are free to withdraw from this study without any penalty at any time and that you are not obligated to answer any of the questions. When I write the final report and prepare manuscripts for publication, I will use pseudonyms and will not use any quotations that might identify you. I assure you that everything you say will be held in confidence. Today, with your permission, I would like to tape record our conversation. I will have our taped conversation transcribed and then returned to you for review and approval before I use them as data. Do you have any questions before we begin? The second interview will be guided by the following questions and will be semi-structured in order to allow participants to pose their own questions:

*I am going to read to you what I learned from you during our first interview regarding the **strengths and challenges in your school.** What have I missed? Do you have anything to add?*

*I am going to read to you what I learned from you during the first interview regarding **your reaction to the definition of a PLC model.** What have I missed? Do you have anything to add?*

*I am going to read to you what I learned from you during the first interview regarding **benefits and limitations of the PLC model**. What have I missed? Do you have anything to add?*

*I am going to read to you what I learned from you during the first interview regarding **teacher participation in the model and its effect on professional and personal identity.** What have I missed? Do you have anything to add?*

*I am going to read to you what I learned from you during the first interview regarding **further information about PLC models** which would assist you in your work as teacher. What have I missed? Do you have anything to add?*

Other:

- *If I had conducted this study a year ago, would the results have been different?*
- *You are in the third year of implementing a PLC model. What will the professional learning community at Goldenview look like three years from now?*

Appendix F
Second Focus Group Interview Schedule

Thank you for taking the time to participate in my study of *Educators' perceptions of a professional learning community model.* I have learned a great deal about how teachers' personal and professional identities are affected through participating in a professional learning community and would now like to share with you what I have found out. I would request as well that you tell me what I have missed. The questions I will ask you during this interview have been designed with that purpose in mind. I would like to remind you that you are free to withdraw without penalty from this study at any time and that you are not obligated to answer any of the questions. When I write my thesis and prepare articles for publication or conference presentations, I will use pseudonyms and will not use any quotations that might identify you. I promise that everything you say will be held in confidence. Today, Dr. Foster, my thesis supervisor, will once again be taking notes from our conversation. I will type those up and get them back to you for your review and approval before I use them as data. Only my thesis supervisor and I will have access to the data. All notes and tape recordings will be kept secured in my home and then destroyed after five years. Do you have any questions before we begin?

I am going to read to you what I have learned about your school. These interpretations reflect what I have observed and heard since coming to your school. I will ask you to comment and provide feedback. Dr. Foster will take notes as you provide this feedback. If you would prefer, you can also contact me through phone or e-mail.

Strengths

- The strength identified by all participants is a hard-working staff which is committed to the needs of children, with most participants also commenting that teachers have a great deal of expertise in their areas. As a result of this environment, students leaving Goldenview are well-skilled, not only academically, but in other areas as well.
- Several teachers talked about the good structure of the school consisting of clear expectations, good follow-through, and strong communication links between school and home.
- A number of participants talked about the safe environment of Goldenview, and the good reputation that it enjoys in the community.
- Several teachers also talked about the strength of a K-9 school structure, and how that supports a positive learning environment at Goldenview.

Challenges

- The challenge that was identified by almost all participants is lack of time. Some factors influencing this lack of time are:
    - an increase in instructional and supervision minutes
    - pressure of completing curricular objectives and preparing for PATs
    - an attempt to balance academic with citizenship outcomes

- Many of you identified these time constraints as having a negative effect on staff collaboration and collegiality.
- Lack of resources was another commonly-identified challenge, resulting in large classes in certain areas and general shortage of $$$.
- Other areas of challenge identified **by at least two participants** included communication and the efficiency in sharing information, administrative changes at Goldenview since its inception, the origin of the school from a junior high and elementary school, technology in the sense of gaining access to working equipment, mainstreaming of special needs students, and fluctuation of student population which leads to yearly instability in classroom organization.

There are three research questions around which I have structured my study. The first one involves educators' understanding and expectations of a PLC model.

1. Understanding and Expectations of a PLC model

- A number of the participants were not familiar with the terminology of "professional learning community." Upon hearing some of the defining aspects of it, several of these participants expressed the thought that it was just naming what good teachers have always done.
- Those participants who had more knowledge of the model, through reading, study, and/or experience…
    - Saw importance of putting labels on things that perhaps good teachers have been doing for a while, as it puts good practices at the forefront, and helps to bring common vocabulary, aims, and focus to schools.
- Consensus that collaboration was a good thing, as it reduces the isolation factor, although there were some differences in how collaboration was defined. Several viewed it as sharing across common levels or subjects, while others viewed it in broader terms.
- Those who had more knowledge of model saw it as helping teachers' knowledge grow, becoming more visible, and more overt; everyone is involved in ongoing learning and in sharing it.
- Most participants saw that effective administration is necessary to implement such a model; this effectiveness was defined in a variety of ways (in creating time, in creating trust and openness, in preventing artificiality and imposed nature, in focusing on strengths of people, in embedding it within school culture, YET in making sure it is not top-down, in breaking down existing walls, in putting certain structures in place).
- Most participants saw that time and resources must be carved out, and that it takes time to implement.

Goldenview:

- Most participants felt that there was much collaboration already, particularly informally
- Some felt that the collaboration focuses primarily on common goals for student learning and discipline, and that there is room to expand this definition of collaboration, particularly as it relates to school-wide initiatives.
- General consensus regarding shared mission and value – process was valuable but product was predictable; a few commented that Goldenview could possibly have gone further with final product in refining and fine-tuning and making meaningful.

Question: The PLC model is built on theory, as most models are. What is the value of theory in the practitioner's mind? What role does it play in your daily practice?

2. The second question: How sense of professional and personal identity is affected (Benefits & Limitations) through participation in a professional learning community model.

- A couple of participants commented that the two identities are often intertwined, particularly the longer one teaches. I have attempted to separate the two for purposes of reporting this summary, but they clearly overlap in a number of areas.

Prof.: (+)

- Many of you mentioned how professional identity is enhanced and strengthened through collaboration, and how it breaks up the isolation factor*.
- Several also mentioned how collaboration eases stress, particularly for new teachers*;
- A few also mentioned how sharing with others can build confidence in your own practice as a teacher, and of the energy that is created in this type of learning community*; can create new sense of freedom in admitting you don't have it all, and still being accepted and supported ;

Prof.: (-)

- Many of you mentioned that you can't force people to collaborate.*
- Several mentioned how teaching is naturally an isolating profession, and that any change is cause for concern*;
- One participant spoke of the pressure involved in re-thinking / reflection and balancing other demands of teaching; this seems to go back to the challenge of time.

Personal Identity: (+)

- A few participants spoke about the energy that is created when teachers collaborate and come together in community, and how it promotes happier teachers, and as one person put it, results in happier kids. *
- Several participants mentioned the easing of teacher stress by the sharing of ideas.*
- A few participants spoke about increased self-confidence as being a benefit of this type of model; some defined this self-confidence further as the freedom to be yourself, with all of your strengths and weaknesses, and still be accepted and supported.

Personal Identity: (-)

- Several mentioned how change is difficult*;
- Many participants said that collaboration is not wanted by all, sometimes because of personality and sometimes because of past experience*;
- Several spoke of the courage and vulnerability it requires to speak up and give your opinion or to share weaknesses, especially as teachers often lack confidence*;
- Some also spoke about how school environment can influence this openness*; unveiling can lead to feelings of doubt and self-deprecation, affecting self esteem*; pride is often involved; human nature for people to fear de-privatization; change (in way of relating to others) is difficult*; quest for power could be a factor*;

* *More than one person voicing this.*

Teacher Profession/Personal Identity at Goldenview:

- Several participants alluded to the effect of revolving administration at Goldenview, and how teachers have learned how to survive without strong administrative direction in this area. There is a sense that people seek out the relationships that they need on their own to be the best teacher they can be, whether intra-school or inter-school
- Several teachers spoke of the origin of the school, and the impact that has had on school culture and individual identity; this is especially seen in light of new teachers to Goldenview and their effect.
- Several expressed a feeling that with the right type of leadership, staff is ready to start breaking down more of the barriers – personal and professional;

3. Third question: Manner in which educators evaluate models

Most mentioned that the important factors were time/resources:

- Is there time provided for implementation of the model, including training?
- Does it take away from time with kids in the classroom?
- Are the resources and necessary structures in place to support this model?

Another related factor was efficiency:

- Does it ease the load, or add to it?
- Is it practical and does it make sense?
- Can it be built in to all we do, so that it is not perceived as an add-on?

A third important factor was the sense in how it meets a perceived need and has perceived benefit: (Here some of the responses were more individual depending upon the perceived need and benefit desired.)

- Does it offer anything better than what I am already doing?
- Does it create new energy and excitement for teachers?
- Does it allow for an increased sense of professionalism?
- Does it allow for both autonomy and a sense of mutual support?
- Is it valuable and meaningful, or simply a political issue?
- Does it take care of teachers, give to them, as well as respect them?

- Does it build richer and more open relationships, promoting authenticity within a supportive environment?
- Does it produce happier teachers, and thus happier kids?

Question: If you could change anything about Goldenview to make it even better, what would it be?

Appendix G
Participant Questions about Professional Learning Community Models

The following are each participant's questions regarding evaluation of a professional learning community model. The questions were formulated from participants' comments in individual and focus group interviews.

The questions were used to organize the findings of Chapter 6 into three themes: (a) philosophy/purpose, (b) leadership/implementation, and (c) practicalities/contextual factors.

Brent:
Does it meet a perceived need? (a)
Does it benefit students? (a)
Does it allow for continuity and sustainability? (a)
Does it permeate school philosophy? (a) (b)
Does it respond to external pressures to do more with less? (c)

Lana:
Does it benefit students? (a)
Will it help us become better at what we do? (a)
Does it promote ongoing learning? (a)
Does it have a strong guiding factor but still allow for individuality? (b)
How can it be embedded into school culture and not seen as an add-on? (c)

Rhoda:
Is there a positive effect on students' learning? (a)
Does it promote teacher learning? (a)
Does it meet a perceived need? (a)
Does it promote school-wide participation? (a)
Does it create sense of energy/excitement? (b)
Does it promote buy-in, or is it imposed? (b)
Does it give back to teachers, thus encouraging willing participation? (b)
Does it value teachers? (b)
Are time and resources allowed for learning / implementation of model? (c)
Does it create less work for teachers, once implemented? (c)

Mike:
Does it take away teachers' time from students? (a)
Is the model simply re-inventing the wheel? (a)
Does it offer anything better than what I am already doing? (a)
Does it take away the focus on the classroom? (a)
Is it imposed, or is there room for teacher autonomy? (b)

Paul:
Is it meaningful, or full of catch phrases? (a)
Does it encourage all voices to be heard? (b)
Does it permeate school practice and encourage emotional involvement and commitment, or is it a surface philosophy? (b)
Does it allow for teacher choice/autonomy in regard to PD? (b)
Is time allotted for implementation/learning of model? (c)

Johnny:
Is the model simply a political device? (a)
Is the model simply re-inventing the wheel? (a)
Is the model meaningful and relevant to actual practice, or simply a surface feature of the school? (b)
Does the model treat teachers in a respectful, professional manner? (b)
Is the model enforced top-down, or does it allow for professional decision-making? (b)
Does the model take care of teachers and their needs? (b)

Susan:
Does it help produce excellent citizens? (a)
Does it allow for rich conversations and meaningful collegial interactions? (a) (b)
Does it balance professionalism and authenticity? (b)
Does it value professionalism? (b)
Are time and money allocated for implementation of the model? (c)
Does it provide an overarching purpose which allows for streamlining of goals, rather than being seen as "one-more-thing"? (c)

Wendy:
Does it lead to happier teachers and thus happier kids? (a)
Does it encourage collegial learning? (a)
Does it help in setting a focus for the school? Where do all the other things fit in? (a)
Does it make sense and ease the load of teaching? (a) (c)
Is there an action plan for implementation? (b)
Does it provide for some autonomy in professional development? (b)
Are time and resources included for implementation of the model? (c)

Nadine:
How does the model suit teachers' personality? (a)
Does it make sense and is it practical, promoting efficiency? (a) (c)
Is it seen as an add-on, or is it teacher-initiated? (b)
How does school structure promote the model? (b) (c)